

# On Being

New Critical Writing on  
Contemporary Art From  
the North-West of England

# Curious

# Contents

- 2 **Foreword**  
By Richard Smith
- 3 **Introduction**  
By Laura Robertson
- 4–11 **What is Art School for?**  
By Liz Mitchell
- 12–15 **“Dorothy, you’re a blini”: Lucy Beech on Women Empowering Women**  
By Amelia Crouch
- 16–21 **From Global Revolution to Creative Catalyst: 30 Years of CFCCA**  
By Katrina Houghton
- 22–27 **Turner Prize 2015: A Fable for the Socially Engaged Arts**  
By Laura Harris
- 28–35 **“Why can’t great art happen here in Pennine Lancashire?” Introducing: Super Slow Way**  
By Jack Welsh
- 36–41 **Islington Mill Art Academy: Investigating What Artists Need**  
By Sara Jaspan
- 42–47 **Contemporary Artists Make History**  
By Lara Eggleton
- 48–53 **Getting From A to B: Commuting the Cultural Corridor**  
By Lauren Velvick
- 54–59 **“It’s my dream job, but it’s voluntary”: Trials and Triumphs at The Royal Standard**  
By C. James Fagan
- 60–65 **Why #writecritical?**  
By Sue Flowers
- 66–67 **About the Writers**

# On Being Curious: New Critical Writing on Contemporary Art From the North-West of England

With a foreword by Richard Smith

Edited and with an introduction by Laura Robertson

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# Foreword

by Richard Smith

How do you draw a conclusion without creating a full stop? By what method should you summarise when threads of activity are interwoven and continue to grow? *Art:ADDS (Art: Audience, Development, Discourse & Skills)* was a regional visual art project full of intricacies and associations that took place in the North-West of England over 2014–16. It was devised as a research and development project that would concentrate on perceived gaps in the arts ecology of the region; crucially, it was constructed to operate beneath the surface and augment the existing visual arts infrastructure.

Born through the *Contemporary Visual Arts Network North-West* (CVAN NW), part of a national association which supports the sector, *Art:ADDS* set out to understand and improve opportunities in the visual arts for artists, young people and writers. There were a multitude of needs to meet: to create skills development options for artists; to increase the agency of young people in the visual arts; and to generate a critical discourse around arts activity to raise the profile of the region. To complicate the aims of the project further, it was hoped the strands would intertwine.

As tends to happen with the visual art sector, ideas and aspirations grew rapidly, and activity quickly reached well beyond the resources available. Nevertheless, as also tends to happen in the visual arts, contributions from individuals and organisations went beyond expectations to ensure the delivery of a deep, rewarding and glorious programme of work.

This short piece of text can't begin to capture the diversity and complexity of interactions and relationships created by *Art:ADDS*. Without the space to acknowledge each individual contribution and activity it feels unjust to mention a few. To begin to illustrate the reach and impact of the project, however, it is worth

acknowledging some of those involved. North-West artists – emerging and established – were showcased in the project's *Modern History* exhibition series, led by invited international curator Professor Lynda Morris, and presented across three leading North-West institutions: Grundy Art Gallery (Blackpool), The Atkinson (Southport) and Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre (Bury). Independent publishers The Double Negative and Art in Liverpool played key roles in establishing a working group that founded a region-wide and intense critical writing programme – nicknamed *#writecritical* – that provided masterclasses, one-to-one mentoring, travel bursaries and publishing fees. Young people informed, participated and took the lead in *Art:ADDS* thanks to a partnership with Blaze (Lancashire), an organisation directed by and for the next generation of cultural leaders, artists and entrepreneurs. Importantly, the strands of work did crossover and feed each other, making the overall programme much richer and more nuanced in the way it reached people and instigated change.

The ambition of *Art:ADDS* was always to facilitate conditions for the visual arts in the North-West to progress and flourish. Thus, this book feels like an apt legacy document, as it is not simply descriptive; it's a superb collection of critical writing that contributes to the debate. It reflects on and around the people and places involved in *Art:ADDS*, touching on its story whilst engaging with a deeper debate around the visual arts. Crucially, as with all good critical writing, it doesn't create a full stop, but instead draws a space for advancement.

**Richard Smith** is curator for Lancaster Arts at Lancaster University (Lancashire), and is a co-chair of Contemporary Visual Arts Network North-West (CVAN NW).

# Introduction

by Laura Robertson

What makes a great story? I would say that curiosity is a key ingredient: “a strong desire to know or learn something”, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary.

In her feature *What is Art School For?* (page 4), Liz Mitchell determines that curiosity is absolutely fundamental to learning: “Being curious is a state applicable to both subject and object – I am curious to know more about this curious thing... looking where you are not meant to look, and asking questions that are not your questions.”

Curiosity, then, also lies at the heart of good arts writing, and of critical writing. The writer who attempts to tell a story about a sculpture, or gallery, or painter, MUST be curious. They must be willing to ask questions others are not, to probe and to pull apart. Their story must appeal to and challenge the reader who is curious about that curious thing.

The people behind this book – its funders, partners, supporters, contributors and editor – take curiosity very seriously. 10 writers have been selected because of their strong desire to know more about art: why it exists, what it can be, and how it evolves. Anyone from anywhere will be able to pick this book up and be entertained, inspired, surprised and informed by the writing within its pages. Commissioned by the Contemporary Visual Arts Network North-West (CVAN NW), these stories are about Turner Prize winners and female funeral directors; student protests and the Northern Powerhouse; canals and 'slow tv'; volunteering and the living wage; Tupperware and moon-landings.

Artists, unsurprisingly, feature strongly in these stories. Highlighted are artists who are known all over the world – Pablo Picasso, Cao Fei, Suzanne Lacy, Jamie Shovlin, Assemble,

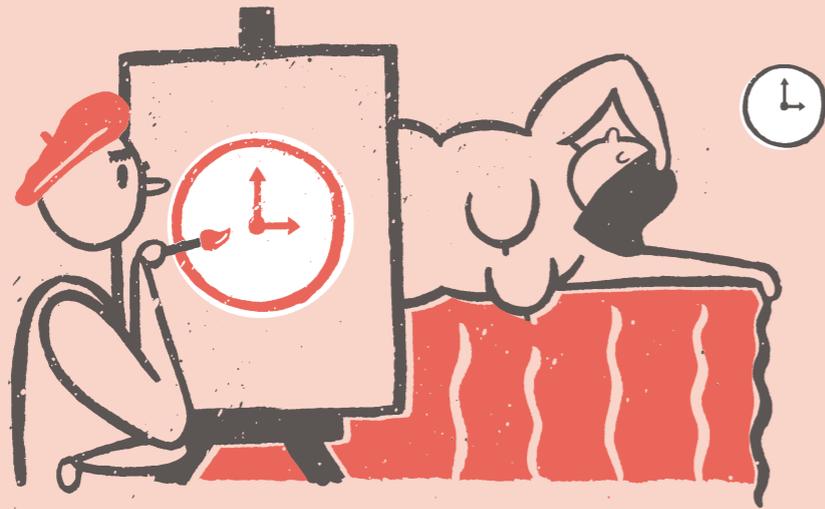
Marcus Coates, Gordon Cheung, Lucy Beech – in addition to rising stars – Joe Fletcher Orr, Sam Mullin, Sarah McGurk, Robert Carter, Lauren Velvick and Daniel Fogarty. Some of the writers included in this book are artists, and some of the artists are writers; possibly due to the curious nature of contemporary art and the multi-skilled, inquisitive people who are drawn to it.

If you have some connection to the North-West of England, what you hold in your hands is testament to a specific curiosity about that region's rich cultural offer. All featured writers – arduously selected from 25 new writing talents who were originally shortlisted from over 100 – live in, work in or were born in Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Merseyside. They are at various stages in their careers; some have been writing within an academic context for many years, and some have just graduated from university. Most have never written for magazines before, and now, through this project, have seen their work published on some of the UK's most respected arts platforms. All stories in this book relate in some shape or form to contemporary art in the North-West: new artworks, established artists and favourite venues.

Some experiences and stories will be familiar to you; others will be welcome discoveries. Essentially, what you hold in your hands is a collection of great stories. I dearly hope that your curiosity is piqued.

**Laura Robertson** is an arts writer and editor based in Liverpool. She was a mentor and working group member on the CVAN NW *Critical Writing Bursary & Workshop Programme*, and co-founded *The Double Negative* contemporary arts criticism journal in 2011 with writer and editor Mike Pinnington.

# What is Art School for?



By Liz Mitchell

As questions about contemporary art education abound – from debates in the Houses of Parliament to artists’ studios – Liz Mitchell asked key British art school representatives what they thought. The response was an unexpectedly impassioned debate, centred primarily on the concept of curiosity...

“You may think that Art College is very free and easy. But it is not.”

This statement was made nearly 50 years ago, by the Association of Members of Hornsey College of Art (1968). In early 2015, it appeared in big vinyl lettering on a gallery wall at Manchester School of Art. I saw it in July, reviewing the exhibition *We Want People Who Can Draw*, and it has stayed with me ever since. The new academic year is just beginning at Manchester and with it, my second year teaching Contextualising Practice. The task is challenging and rewarding in equal measure; I am an art historian/curator by training, not a teacher or even an art practitioner. But since embarking on a part-time PhD three years ago, the art school has slowly seeped into my system. And with it, a question: What exactly is art school for?



*We Want People Who Can Draw* was organised by a small group of research students and lecturers. Its main audience was other students and lecturers. Its content included posters, pamphlets and ephemera that documented the unfolding of political activism in the art school during the 1960s and '70s. But the exhibition was not just a historical essay. Its curators were posing a challenge to the contemporary art school. In a world where education has become a product to be sold, where students are regarded as customers and learning is parcelled up into discrete units measured by commercial transferability, what kind of place has the art school become? And what is art education for?



downgraded in schools (the Warwick Commission report this year revealed a 50% drop in GCSE numbers for Design and Technology and 25% in arts-related subjects since 2003) and tuition fees further narrow the field of opportunity, Smith argues, the art school runs the risk of becoming so elitist it loses its point.

25 years ago I opted for a so-called academic degree rather than art school. I compromised by doing History of Art, up the road at the “other” university, the University of Manchester. A familiar story back then – you didn’t do art if you could get the grades in other subjects. I’ve worked around art and artists all my life, as a curator and writer. And now, in my 40s, I’ve finally done it – I’ve gone to art school. In some ways it does feel free and easy, especially after life in the nine-to-five working world. But the Hornsey students were right. It’s not. It’s deeply, seriously important, in ways that aren’t quantifiable by market measures. A student friend mentioned to me recently that he knew a guy who’d failed his art degree at Manchester, but who firmly believed that his art school experience continued to influence all his thoughts and actions. I’m not advocating failing your degree, but clearly, art school is about much more than something for your CV.

In reviewing *We Want People Who Can Draw*, I emailed the exhibition’s curators, along with a few friends and colleagues, to ask them: What do you think art school is for? This rather casually asked question sparked an unexpectedly impassioned debate, one that centred primarily on the concept of curiosity.

The dictionary defines curiosity as “a strong desire to know or learn something”. But this isn’t really good enough. Curiosity feels more like a kind of momentary stoppage caused by unexpected observation. Being curious is a state applicable to both subject and object – I am curious to know more about this curious thing. But it is easily dismissed; when quizzed as to why we ask particular questions, we might answer: “Oh, just curious”, as if it doesn’t matter. Professor in Art Education and Art History at the University of North Texas (USA), Tyson E Lewis, argues that “just” is a way of disavowing this stoppage, what he describes as the appearance of “a surplus in the field of the sensible”. The curious is something that doesn’t

quite fit; curiosity is our recognition of this. French philosopher Jacques Rancière describes curiosity in terms of looking where you are not meant to look, and asking questions that are not your questions. This is paying attention to the moment of stoppage, and following it up. It is curiosity as not knowing your place – or maybe knowing it very well but choosing not to stay in it. Which locates it as a potentially transformative state of being. Following Rancière, Simon Faulkner, senior lecturer in Art History at Manchester School of Art, described his ideal of the art school as: “A place where the relationship between learning and its effects is not pre-determined. Art school education should be something through which new questions are asked and new possibilities are opened up, including questions about how art education might be experienced and what it is meant to do.”

So maybe art school is not “just” about being curious, but about understanding the implications and responsibilities of curiosity. About becoming attentive to those moments of disruption that shift the parameters of what is reasonable or even possible. Juan Cruz, dean of the School of Fine Art at the Royal College of Art, London, describes his job as: “Helping students to gain some sense of their own criticality and agency... to acknowledge and exploit the fact that they are cognisant beings capable of making decisions and susceptible to wondering about where that capacity comes from.”

Cruz is also a participant in *The Autonomy Project*, a European partnership of art institutions set up to develop and critique the concept of autonomy in contemporary artistic and curatorial practice. Autonomy is a key concept in the production of art. Once it meant the conscious separation of art and the artist from the social conditions within which work is produced. Art that was self-referential, free-floating, released from the concerns of everyday life – modernist art. *The Autonomy Project* doesn’t mean it like this. We live in a world now where it can be argued that all action, all meaning exists only within the social, political, cultural and economic conditions which make it possible. In this context, art is always already mired in the ideologies from which it emerges. This, in part, lay behind the protests of the 1960s and ‘70s. Art should be about society, of society, within society.

*The Autonomy Project* thus seeks a different understanding of what an autonomous art practice might look like. It seeks a way of producing socially engaged art, an art that does something whilst recognising that it doesn’t do it from the outside. Art that is also aware of the way in which everything we do is co-opted, re-interpreted and assimilated back into the society that produces it. Which is how the bad girls and boys of contemporary art command the highest prices in our novelty-craving, market-driven world. Jeroen Boomgard, another contributor to *The Autonomy*



**Art is not separate from life; it is the very description of the lives we lead**



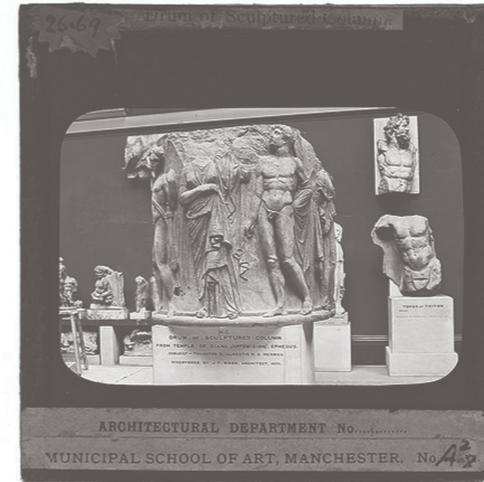
## Walk the corridors of art schools up and down the Kingdom and you see one shiny Mac suite after another

Project, describes the purpose of art education as making students aware of this contradictory demand to obey by disobeying: “This awareness cannot be attained by teaching them to ‘do their own thing’ but by teaching them to ‘do their thing’ in relation to the specific ways in which art is instrumentalised at any given time and the specific ways in which it is supposed to refuse this very instrumentalisation.”

Towards the end of last term, I became involved in a project to save Manchester School of Art’s historic Visual Resources Centre. The Centre is home to a collection of over 300,000 slides, from lantern slides of drawing classes in 1910 to teaching aids from the ‘60s onwards, and the documentation of degree shows a decade ago. It is a visual and material history of British art education. But, as has happened in so many areas, it only took a few short years for the ubiquity of the digital to render it obsolete. So earlier this year, the art school decided to digitise a small number of images (those for which the university owns the copyright) and dispose of the rest. After all, without the potential of income-generation, what possible use could it be?

In response, a small group of students set up a participatory artwork, making use of the very digital medium that had de-valued the collection, to explore different notions of value that it might yet embody. *Adopt a Slide* invited students, staff and anyone with an interest to visit the collection, select just one slide and “adopt” it, by means of creative response and writing, shared via a blog, [pickaslide.wordpress.com](http://pickaslide.wordpress.com). The response was immediate, impassioned and, on occasion, blunt in its condemnation of what one participant described as “the econometrics of the art school”:

“Walk the corridors of art schools up and down the Kingdom and you see one shiny Mac suite after another, distinguishable from each other only by their differing appeals to weary blandness... In this way, art schools have increasing needs for huge portico lettering, because once inside you can’t tell them from the business and enterprise academy?”



Contributions to the project ranged from the lyrical and reflective to the stridently political – and sometimes both. They reflect the diversity of the collection and its potential for sparking discussion and ideas. On the project blog, *Computer Art* from 1981 sits alongside casts of Greek statuary from the 1900s; Nigerian figure painting, once filed under the heading of *Ethnic Art*, alongside Piero della Francesca’s *Flagellation of Christ*. Reader in Art, Fionna Barber, adopted a whole sheet of slides bearing images of feminist artworks by the likes of Monica Sjoo, Margaret Harrison and Lubaina Himid. In her accompanying text she reflects on her excitement at discovering these artists as a student, and how she later used these same images to give her own students a sense of how art practice might connect to a wider politics: “The slides on this sheet speak to each other... And this multiplicity of images and the politics that impel them also evokes an important feature of feminist art practice in the 1970s and early ‘80s. This was about strength and solidarity as part of a collective politics.”



Three months on, a “curious” thing has happened. The diminutive analogue slide, with its transient, apparently worthless image thrown against a painted wall, has become a site of resistance. Resistance to the concept of value measured purely as market worth. Its very obsolescence, an odd combination of durability and vulnerability, opened up a range of unexpected possibilities and spaces for debate. This is exactly what art school should be doing: facilitating the chance encounter and proliferation of ideas. But in this case, the space opened up was one of challenge to the very institution that houses it.

Framing *Adopt a Slide* as an artwork was both a conceptual and political strategy. In another context, it might have been conceived of simply as a campaign. But it’s harder to interfere with the integrity of an artwork than it is to question the legitimacy of protest, particularly in the very place of art production. And anyway, as we know, protest is fine if it’s art. However, it was (and is) more than a cynical gesture. Another of the project collaborators described it thus: “This is exactly what art school should be doing: facilitating the chance encounter and proliferation of ideas.”



**This is exactly what art school should be doing: facilitating the chance encounter and proliferation of ideas**

In a world where anything can be art, perhaps it is the how and why and what of calling something art that is important. Of understanding what difference it makes. Is this what art school should be about? The development of openness to a state of being that can be world-changing but isn't instrumentally so? We wanted to save the slide collection, but *Adopt a Slide* was not just a vehicle for doing so. There was a separate petition for that.

These arguments aren't exactly new, as last summer's *We Want People Who Can Draw* exhibition amply demonstrated. But they seem to have acquired a renewed urgency (the number of recent conferences, symposia, articles and blog posts on the art school subject attests to this – just Google it). Other questions arose from my correspondence with colleagues; important questions that aren't directly addressed here but are woven throughout. Questions about the relationship between skill and intellect, about material and making and the body and the self. About if and how art education is or should be different to any other discipline. After all, if curiosity, openness and creative thinking are life skills, then surely we need them in every field of endeavour?

Responses to my question "What is art school for?" ranged from the theoretically complex to the deceptively simple, and it became very clear that what I had thought of as a fairly straightforward question is in fact complicated, conflicted and not likely to be resolved any time soon. Which is a good thing actually, as it opens up possibility. It has generated those experimental alternatives to the formal art school that the aforementioned Professor Bauer advocated – in the shape of independent, fee-free, peer-led initiatives such as the Islington Mill Art Academy, Salford, or School of the Damned, East London, although it seems to me these are more of a postgraduate than undergraduate phenomenon.



## I don't know what to do about tuition fees and administrative rigidity and 'tick-box' assessment criteria, other than to debate them

So it doesn't let the university art school off the hook. The widespread reduction of British education to a market ethos poses a fundamental threat to the development of creative thinking per se. And this comes in two directions. At an institutional level, it is the continual and pervasive scrutiny of outputs; the breaking down of time into smaller and smaller discrete chunks; administrative structures that allow no room for flexibility. At the other end, it is the way a generation of schoolchildren and students are becoming habituated to the idea that education costs and that the only measure of success is getting it right. So that what's in it for them has to be concrete, immediate, and worth the money. Of course students want to come out of higher education



with skills and knowledge that will equip them to earn a living. But higher education should not be just about training for a job. It ought to be about flexing your wings, possibly for the first time, in a place where you have room to do so. It ought to be about seeing how that feels and where it takes you, about beginning to find out what you're made of and what matters to you.

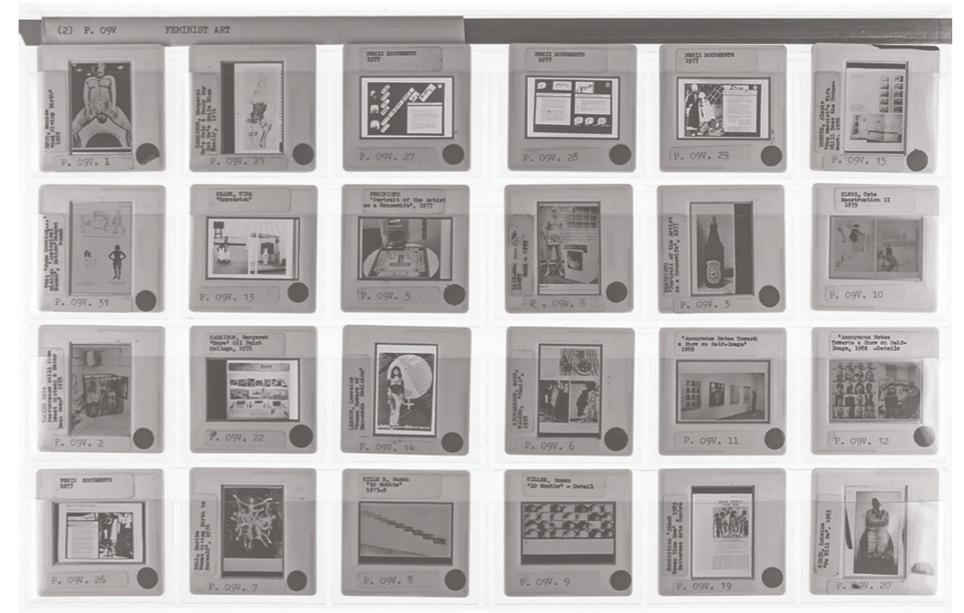
All rather nebulous-sounding, maybe, but it is this that makes people creative thinkers and problem solvers. And it's not free and easy at all, it's actually remarkably challenging. But this is what art school is really good at, and this is why it is not pointless, but more important than ever. We lose sight of this to the detriment of our whole society.

I don't know what to do about tuition fees and administrative rigidity and 'tick-box' assessment criteria, other than to debate them, critique them, challenge them at every opportunity, as intelligently as possible. Meanwhile, I would urge new and returning students and their tutors – hell, everyone really – to take the advice of Hazel Jones, senior lecturer in Interactive Arts at Manchester School of Art. Go out and measure puddles and not know why you're doing it. Beat a sheet of metal into a dome because it feels good and is really noisy. Pick just one image from 300,000 and wonder why you chose it. Pay attention to your curiosity. It matters. ♦

A version of this article was originally published on [thedoublenegative.co.uk](http://thedoublenegative.co.uk).

*We Want People Who Can Draw: Instruction and Dissent in the British Art School*, MMU Special Collections Gallery, Manchester (Greater Manchester), UK, 20 April to 31 July 2015.

All images from *Adopt a Slide* [pickaslide.wordpress.com](http://pickaslide.wordpress.com)  
Courtesy of David Penny and Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections.



# “Dorothy, you’re a blini”: Lucy Beech on Women Empowering Women



By Amelia Crouch



Lucy Beech, *Me and Mine* (2015).  
Commissioned by FVU.

Tupperware, networking and Weight Watchers: Amelia Crouch finds herself drawn into the world of female self-help groups via Lucy Beech’s compelling solo exhibition at the Harris Museum & Art Gallery...

“You’ll be known as ‘garlic bread’ [...] and Dorothy, you’re a blini.” So Helen, the hostess of a lunch-club-cum-self-help group in Lucy Beech’s 2013 short film *Cannibals*, tells her new recruits. Each newcomer is allocated an appetizer, whilst returning members are ascribed a main course or – in the case of Helen who is “graduating” – the dessert.

We watch the women clutching their dishes, covered in tin foil, as they file through a house and into a mini marquee in the garden. Here, they sit on a circle of exercise mats, sharing emotional experiences and undergoing a series of “tenderising” procedures that include wearing vibrating pads and gargling salt water, before moving on to the meal.

The exact purpose of this six-strong female gathering remains oblique, yet the film is peppered with language and motifs that evoke groups such as Weight Watchers, yoga or pyramid financial schemes. The women are there to “achieve full financial value and emotional support.”

A concern with contemporary female identity, and with the role of the individual in the group, pervades this and the other two works in Beech’s *Me and Mine* exhibition at the Harris Museum & Art Gallery in Preston. *Buried Alive*

(2013) depicts a fictitious leadership workshop in two looping short films, screened on adjacent flat screen monitors; whilst *Me and Mine* (2015), a 35 minute single screen projection commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella, is centred on an awards ceremony for women in the funeral industry. The films are fictitious but anchored in the real world: Beech fabricates them from “field notes”, collected through work-shops and networking events.

The content for *Cannibals* came from research into multi-level marketing schemes and the all-female support group *Women Empowering Women*. *Me and Mine* saw Beech attending and documenting the *Good Funeral Awards* as part of her research. Both films contain passages which I suspect are drawn directly from ‘real’ people: a character in *Cannibals* reveals her addiction to online poker; an award recipient in *Me and Mine* describes how 30 years ago people would presume she was a nurse or solicitor – anything but the funeral director. These stories lead me to empathise with the films’ characters even whilst elements of their behaviour are absurd or unlikeable.



Lucy Beech, *Me and Mine* (2015).  
Commissioned by FVU.

The female represented in Beech's films is not an everywoman. The portrayed women are all white, neither very young nor very old, and probably middle class. It's a demographic with which I overlap; I recognise some of its tropes and I find myself wondering when I learned the word "blini". Yet though the experiences depicted are not universal, Beech taps into something pertinent about contemporary culture; the women are all searching for meaningful connections to others in a world where "self" has become a construct or commodity, and where interpersonal relationships are infected by corporate rhetoric.

*Me and Mine* turns our attention to the professional domain of the funeral industry – an industry historically dominated by men. The film moves between the workplaces of two female funeral directors, who represent contrasting approaches to the profession, and scenes from an awards ceremony weekend where their paths cross. As the narrative unfolds the main protagonist – who works in a traditional undertakers, and is arguably a trailblazer for the role of women in a man's world – is sidelined by a second protagonist (who works for "Eco Alternatives") and her peers. The latter purportedly represent an industry trend



**The women are all searching for meaningful connections to others in a world where 'self' has become a construct or commodity**

toward a feminised, empathetic approach, yet they uncaringly exclude one who does not adhere to their methodology.

*Me and Mine* can be read as both a celebration of female agency and as a critique of how this agency is limited and curtailed. Yes, more women are working as funeral directors, but are their roles proscribed anew by a culturally constructed 'female' way of doing things?

It is an ambitious film involving a large cast, more complex locations and a significantly longer duration than the exhibited earlier works. However, its structure and visual style are less resolved. On first viewing, I missed some of the film's more subtle narrative cues. There is a tension between non-linear time – where events involving the same characters in different locations are intercut – and the linearity imposed by a longer format film. In contrast, the shorter looping structures of *Cannibals* and *Buried Alive* invite repeat or partial viewing, more suitable for the gallery context.

In *Buried Alive*, the simultaneously empowering and distancing verbal language (women are being trained to start businesses in which they will help other women to "imagine another future" and "remarket" themselves) is echoed by the film's visuals. On one screen, participants bury a group member on a sandy beach. As their hands scabble to release her, they cajole: "Well done", and she asks: "Do you want me running into the sea?" The film cuts to a shot of the woman in her bathing suit doing just that and it is reminiscent of 'before' and 'after' weight loss images, or so many similar advertisements extolling a happy life.

On the second screen, we watch a kind of guided meditation; cutting between the omniscient camera footage and mobile phone footage shot by an actor-participant – who documents her experience, as if to authenticate it. This inserted 'amateur' footage reinforces the message that the group is less to do with genuine relationships, and more about constructing believable representations of relationships.

Perhaps *Me and Mine*'s cool, unobtrusive visual language is intended to mimic the sleek but generic hotel in which the awards ceremony takes place and to foreground how we distance



**As we watch mouths tearing apart morsels of food, Dorothy – the film's protagonist – imagines biting through her own glands, her own muscle**

ourselves from death (whether via traditional or more contemporary alternative means), but I found myself wishing for something messier, more visceral. In *Cannibals*, there is a compelling, ever present physicality; from the vibrating flesh of women's bodies, to the film's closing sequence, where the participants consume their starters in close up. As we watch mouths tearing apart morsels of food, Dorothy – the film's protagonist – imagines biting through her own glands, her own muscle, and in the voiceover soundtrack, she describes consuming herself.

*Cannibals* ends with Dorothy neatly encasing a dessert in Tupperware and placing it in the fridge. Is she saving it for when she completes her ascent through the lunch-club scheme? Or is she packing it away and disconnecting from the group? This ambivalence, and the contrast between the film's tactile and dispassionate elements, encapsulates the best of Beech's ability to simultaneously champion and question contemporary female roles. ♦

A version of this article was originally published on [thedoublenegative.co.uk](http://thedoublenegative.co.uk).

Lucy Beech: *Me and Mine*, Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston (Lancashire), UK, 2 May to 4 July 2015.

# From Global Revolution to Creative Catalyst: 30 Years of CFCCA



By Katrina Houghton

A Manchester-based agency, gallery and residency space, CFCCA has been championing contemporary Chinese art – on the ground in China and the UK – for over three decades. Katrina Houghton reflects on its economic and cultural impact, and the household name artists whose careers it has launched...

“Culture is a living thing; it’s always changing” – Amy Lai, 1986.

There was something in the air in Manchester during 1986. It was the year that the GMEX centre opened as Europe’s largest indoor arena; Alex Ferguson became manager of Manchester United; The Smiths released *The Queen is Dead*; and the impressive Ming Dynasty *Imperial Arch* replica had begun construction in Chinatown. It almost seems natural that the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art (CFCCA) also began its legacy as *Chinese View '86* within this 12 month period.

Founded by Hong Kong artist Amy Lai, *Chinese View '86* was a two-week arts festival that set out to support UK audiences to learn more about Chinese culture. Manchester was already bustling with a vibrant Chinese community that had been settled for over two decades; the city was preparing for the first Chinese Housing Association and Chinese Healthcare unit in the UK. It was perfect timing to birth what would become a national and leading Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art. Lai seized the opportunity, and within three years *Chinese View '86* became the Chinese Arts Centre, opening at 36 Charlotte Street in Chinatown where they remained until 1997, before moving to Thomas Street in the Northern Quarter.

CFCCA at night.



Arthur Siuksta (2016)

And the rest, as they say, is history. Three venues, three name changes and six directors later, CFCCA celebrates 30 years with a rich programme of exhibitions and events across Manchester in 2016.

“The programme has been a way for us to tell the cultural history of a city”, explains curator Ying Tan, who joined CFCCA in 2013. “With this anniversary we were able to form something that will celebrate us as an organisation. This will go on to mark where we have come from, the locations we have been in and the different cultural landscapes and economic downturns we have survived.”



Gordon Cheung in the *Breathe* residency studio.

The success of a relatively small and specialised arts organisation outside of London is admirable. As the UK's only publicly-funded arts venue dedicated to contemporary art in China, they are incredibly proud to be settled in Manchester.

"I think one of the reasons we have been so successful is down to our location", Tan continues. "We have always been here, we are part of the cultural landscape. It's really interesting because it not only tells our history but also the history of the cultural agenda in the UK."

CFCCA has been built upon an ambition to nurture an understanding of the relationship between the UK and China, and the significance of this link stretches far beyond art. Over the course of its history, CFCCA has accumulated a broad amount of expertise in helping us to understand what is happening in China whilst strengthening cultural and business relationships. As well as being CFCCA's 30th birthday, this year also marks 30 years of Manchester's sister city agreement with Wuhan, capital of central China's Hubei Province.

"The centre has become an outstanding cultural asset," says Sir Richard Leese, leader of Manchester City Council; "supporting the city to increase our commercial connection with China, strengthening investment and further collaborations in the UK." Results can be seen in the Manchester China Forum and the new British Consulate General in Wuhan.

However, far from being just an asset to aid international business, Arts Council England sees CFCCA as also flying the flag for the importance of national investment in the arts, as the funding body's executive director for arts and culture, Simon Mellor, tells me. "Since the turn of the century," Mellor says, "in excess of five million pounds have been invested into CFCCA because we see the centre as a really significant asset for the nation."

The Arts Council's long-term support is based upon three things, Mellor explains: genuine artistic ambition, "determinedly international" diversity, and support for artists.

"CFCCA have acknowledged that vibrant artistic ecology and development in this country really depends on the way we provide long-term and sustained support for individual artists", continues Mellor. "Their programme of residential exchange makes an invaluable contribution to artists, helping them to build sustainable careers that, in my view, many arts organisations should be learning from."

It's easy to see how CFCCA could succumb to offering an output of safe exhibitions and engagement projects simply in order to tick the right boxes for the Arts Council's portfolio. Instead, the organisation has chosen to nurture and develop the careers of a long list of dynamic and, at times, provocative artists. This includes some of the most important Chinese artists working today: Xu Bing, Lee Mingwei, Gordon Cheung, Tsang Kin-Wah, Susan Pui San Lok and Cao Fei.

In questioning how such a well-established institution can build upon their reputation for the future, we should look towards how CFCCA can strengthen relationships within their local demographic. The term *Northern Powerhouse* has been flying through the air of late, in regards to the Conservative government's promise to boost economic growth in the North of England. It would be no coincidence to assume that Manchester's connections with China have been part of that agenda. Visual arts have a significant role to play in securing the North's creative identity for the future, and CFCCA sits in an interesting position when it comes to bridging the gap between the arts, local and national economic development, and international business links.

And that is something that CFCCA does not take for granted. In an astute move, CFCCA signed an agreement with the University of Salford in 2013 to cultivate a new collection of Chinese contemporary art. Notably, the collection began with the co-commission of *Haze & Fog* by the aforementioned Fei; which Tan describes as "using video and the 'zombie-movie' trope to create a commentary on the consumer culture and daily life of Chinese citizens born after the global revolution." Since then, CFCCA and the university have continued to establish a collection of artworks that are available for loan to museums and galleries across the UK and the world. The collection has toured internationally, emphasising the rising importance of contemporary Chinese culture and art whilst crafting a legacy CFCCA can build upon. As Leese puts it: "Manchester thrives on partnerships."

Whilst CFCCA has its roots in the specialist subject of Chinese art, their experience in fostering new talent should also be shared to create a stronger arts ecology. It will be intriguing to watch how this partnership develops and reinforces artistic links in the North of England.

“”

**Artist Gordon Cheung fondly recalls his time spent in residence at CFCCA: "They gave me the possibility to continue as an artist"**

“We are influential as a small organisation”, Tan adds, “but with the University of Salford’s help, this immediately magnifies what we are able to do. We can be more ambitious.”

CFCCA’s aptitude in collaboration seems to be at the very heart of the organisation; with a strong team not only working in the gallery itself but also on the ground in China through associate curators, who ensure they stay at the forefront of their field.

Tan proudly explains: “Without the help of our associate curators we would struggle to stay as relevant. They provide a really rich source of materials, insight and contacts for us there – giving our own staff a wider understanding of the culture we are trying to portray.”

Cultural exchange drives much of CFCCA’s programming and this can be seen in the success of *Harmonious Society* (Asia Triennial 2014): an invitation to over 30 artists from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan to exhibit work across six major venues in Manchester – John Ryland’s Library, The National Football Museum, Artwork, Museum of Science & Industry, Manchester Cathedral and at CFCCA itself. *Harmonious Society* examined the conflicts and harmony within Greater China, providing an international perspective on the country’s recent and rapid development, as well as casting a spotlight on societies in Asia and the rest of the world – such as the conflicting states of Israel and Palestine.

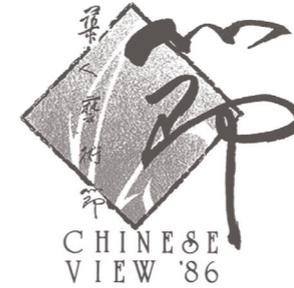
Yet it is CFCCA’s smallest feature that is its strongest – and most charming – asset: a well-established residency programme. The Market Building venue they have been occupying for over a decade has a purpose-built studio/gallery with temporary artist living space, accessed by ladder, allowing residents to fully immerse themselves in the city’s art scene. “They become part of the extended family,” observes Tan. “It’s a really good base for them to travel and understand the art ecology that is very unique to Manchester. We get to make connections that go beyond the gallery and it’s wonderful to continue those relationships.”



Above: *RareKind China, Honest* (2015)  
Right: *Cao Fei, La Town* (2015)  
Photo courtesy the artist and Vitamin Creative Space.



Chinese View '86 exhibition poster (1986).



Gordon Cheung fondly recalls his time spent in residence at CFCCA. “They gave me the possibility to continue as an artist”, Cheung tells me. “The residency wasn’t just about being a creative catalyst, it was also about the support I had from CFCCA and the others they put me in touch with, such as Castlefield Gallery. From there, my work was recommended to the *British Art Show* and I am eternally grateful for the experience.”

Their current exhibition, running from February to July 2016, is simply entitled *30 Years of CFCCA* and it celebrates what the organisation has accomplished since the beginning, through an impressive alumni of artists, curators and academics. The show marks not only CFCCA’s milestones but also the success achieved by individuals since their days at the arts space.

“We are writing our future history,” says Tan on the curatorial framework of this period, which includes a series of newly commissioned work. “We feel incredibly grateful to have developed these relationships with young emerging artists at the time and who have now gone on to have international acclaim. It’s great to invite them back with new works.”

Xu Bing is a great example; having his first UK solo show at the centre in 2003. Now an internationally-renowned artist, who headlined the China Pavilion at the Venice Biennale last year, Bing has returned to CFCCA with an extensive project that explores the impact that communication, text and language have had on our perceptions of the globalised world. Developing a universal “language of icons” for his project *Book From The Ground*, pictograms and emoticons tell the story of Mr Black and his daily life. You are

invited into an installation of Bing’s studio as it was during the making of the piece, illustrating his working methods and also encouraging you to contribute through the use of specially developed software. It is a very playful experience, and easily understood by anyone engaged in modern life.

The rest of the 2016 programme includes *Rarekind China* (until April), a diverse collection of graffiti and street art from China and the UK that pulls together collaborations with writers, academics, illustrators and designers; Fei’s *La Town* (throughout March), a post-apocalyptic city made entirely from miniature models, and Kin-Wah’s *The first trumpet in the new millennium* (April), which references the September 11 attacks. *30 Years of CFCCA* will also welcome Mingwei’s *Between Going and Staying* (May), a sensory installation of fine black sand against the backdrop of the (cello-like instrument) *MaToChin*; and Lok’s *RoCH Fans and Legends* (June), which draws on adaptations of the condor *Trilogy* (1957–61), a classic “wuxia” (meaning “martial hero”) epic published in 1950s Hong Kong by author Louis Cha.

This is an in-depth and ambitious portrayal of CFCCA as an agency, gallery and residency space; that has clearly provided, as Cheung commented, much more than a creative catalyst. It is an outstanding celebration of 30 years of hard work, providing a supportive foundation for Chinese contemporary art in the UK, and the artists – and audiences – deeply involved and invested in its communication. And perhaps the exhibition is also an indicator of what is to come. Which artists will next launch their careers through the organisation? Through commissions, residencies, or through having their work collected? As CFCCA’s founder Lai reflected back in 1986: “Culture is a living thing; it’s always changing”. Long may the CFCCA continue to respond, adapt and evolve. ♦

*30 Years of CFCCA*, Manchester City Centre (Greater Manchester), UK, February to June 2016.

# Turner Prize 2015: A Fable for the Socially Engaged Arts



By Laura Harris

Assemble's *Turner Prize* win was a fantastic coup for the architecture collective. But the long-term prize for the artwork's subject matter – four streets of terraced houses in Liverpool – will be a community finally and deservedly restored, finds Laura Harris...

How is it that four streets on the outskirts of Liverpool, for years teetering on the edge of dereliction, have found themselves embroiled in this year's *Turner Prize*? Their journey is a fable for the socially engaged arts, populated by characters of extraordinary vision, dedication and boundless ingenuity.

Concertinaing out from the city's regal Princes Avenue lie street after street of empty houses. *The Granby Triangle* is one such group of streets; a once diverse neighbourhood of Victorian housing dismantled physically and psychologically by violent protests and civic mismanagement. The windows of the barren terraces are boarded up, unblinking. Here or there, buddleia might burst through a fractured roof, or fronds of ivy cling to a crumbling wall, the greenery sharp against the red bricks. The houses huddle together and seem to slowly succumb to decay.

The travesty of the Granby streets' predicament lies heaviest on their former residents. The few who remain remember feeling that at one time "the whole world lived here" (Josephine Burger in the Granby Workshop Catalogue). Over the years, Granby has proved an accommodating host to a vibrant cast of communities who have found themselves in Liverpool from across the globe. The current of international shipping bringing goods into Liverpool's docks also welcomed a steady flow of seafarers and their families. The wealth that this trade brought to the city is remembered in the grand houses of Princes Avenue, within earshot of Granby's once spirited, now silent, clubs, shops and cafes.



Assemble

Ducie Street, Liverpool; part of the Granby Four Streets.

Granby's metamorphosis was administered by a council reeling from the Toxteth Riots of 1981. The riots were a manifestation of the voice of an ostracised community frustrated by their experiences of inequality of opportunity and racially motivated police brutality. In cities across the country, from Brixton to Bristol, the anger of the oppressed exploded onto their streets. In the wake of 1981, Liverpool City Council set in motion a process of degradation that nearly swept the area under the blanket of history. Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) forced out existing residents and demolitions were rife. Flimsy new builds were offered as replacements and those residents who remained were subject to a barrage of bureaucracy, with endless questionnaires and surveys constantly probing and making them feel as though they were living in "a zoo" (from the Granby Workshop Catalogue). Cinemas and cultural venues were torn down, schools and other facilities condemned to rubble.

The new millennium brought fresh struggle to the four remaining streets of Granby: Beaconsfield, Cairns, Jermyn and Ducie. In a callous attempt to bolster the diminishing housing market, John Prescott's *Pathfinder* regeneration scheme proposed large scale clearance of Northern and Midland terraces, giving the land over to private hands with a view to build less dense properties. Once again, the residents of Granby were the only oppositional force against the bulldozers making a collision course for their homes.



## Assemble have aimed to address the disjoint between the public and the artist, and the processes of place-making

Granby Workshop.



Assemble



Assemble

Left: Ducie Street interior. Below: Product made in the Granby Workshop.

Building upon the hard work of the local activists, Assemble collaborated with Granby Four Streets CLT on a production plan to refurbish houses and public spaces. As an eye-catching centrepiece, the collective reimagined two of the most dilapidated terraces, with cavernous two story interiors and no roof, as a winter garden. The plan is a sanctuary of life, with exotic plants, ferns and trees rubbing shoulders and thriving in their new home; a forecast of things to come for the residents?

Elsewhere, their vision for *10 Houses on Cairns Street* turns sorely dilapidated houses into homes full of utility and vitality. Materials are reclaimed where possible, and the plans optimise space and light while being thoroughly user-friendly. The playful and handmade architectural elements retain the DIY ethos that is so central to the Granby character. The homes are inviting, asking to be occupied – a perfect rebuttal to their former solitary confinement.

It is testament to the resilience and resourcefulness of the residents that their condemned streets are not only still standing, but are once again welcoming new people home. A group of local activists dedicated to reclaiming their heritage have successfully saved a limited number of houses. Since organising as a Community Land Trust (CLT) in 2012, the Granby Four Streets organisation have come to own 10 properties which soon will be transformed into beautifully functional homes.

The versatility of Granby Four Streets is demonstrated by the allies that they have recruited to bolster the project and realise its potential. Recognising the central role that creativity has to play in Granby's character, Assemble – an 18-strong collective of artists and architects from London – were invited to collaborate. Since forming in 2010, Assemble have aimed to address the disjoint between the public and the artist, and the processes of place-making. Working interdependently and cooperatively, they have turned a disused petrol station into a cinema, a forgotten flyover into a public arts venue, and erected a brutalist playground. Their work is driven by a dedication to actualising the potential public functions of fertile yet disused spaces.

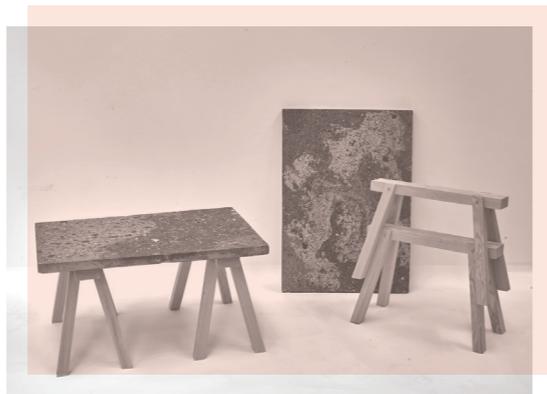


Ben Quinton, Assemble



Ben Quinton, Assemble

Left: Granby Workshop.  
Below: Granby rock table.



Assemble

This ongoing story of social activism and the boundless potential of creative collaboration captures the zeitgeist wherein the field of art has been expanded to encompass enacting real social change. Artists' practices are increasingly socially engaged, allowing distinctions between art and activism to peel away. Notable predecessors of Assemble's work in Granby include Chicago-based Theaster Gates, whose *Dorchester Projects* turn dilapidated buildings into cultural resources for residents. Similarly, in 1993, Rick Lowe instigated the Project Row Houses organisation in Houston as an experiment in how the arts can be used to revitalise depressed inner city neighbourhoods; it now spans six blocks.

Assemble's *Turner Prize* nomination has been met with humility from the collective, and a determination to ensure that Granby residents receive the recognition they deserve. Being thrown into the ring of the *Turner Prize* was a little "uncomfortable", Assemble's Fran Edgerly describes. The process cast a rarefied gaze over the struggle of Granby, distilling decades of injustice into a trend within the institutionalised arts.

The platform of the *Turner Prize* had to be put to work. The resulting exhibition at Tramway,



**Assemble's Turner Prize nomination has been met with humility from the collective, and a determination to ensure that Granby residents receive the recognition they deserve**

Glasgow (2015), launched a showroom for the Granby Workshop. It burst with homewares hand-made in Granby, from block printed fabrics, to mantelpieces made of reclaimed Granby rock. The emporium was a celebration of resourcefulness and creativity, and all profit generated from sales was ploughed back into the area's regeneration. Pre-orders placed during the exhibition went into manufacture from the following January.

Using the platform of the *Turner Prize* to propel the Granby project illustrates the inexhaustible ingenuity of Assemble. Their instinctive deferral of individual glory for the social good is woven into their practice as a collective, and has endeared them to a community in need of support. Congratulations are due to all involved – every campaigner, volunteer or artist – who together created this engine of change. Assemble's *Turner Prize* win, announced late 2015, is a fantastic coup for the collective, but the longterm prize for Granby Four Streets will be a community finally and deservedly restored. ♦

A version of this article was originally published on [thisistomorrow.info](http://thisistomorrow.info).

*Turner Prize 2015*, Tramway, Glasgow, UK, 1 September 2015 to 17 January 2016.

Granby Workshop, Toxteth, Liverpool (Merseyside), UK, 2015 onwards.

Granby Workshop.



Ben Quinton, Assemble

# “Why can’t great art happen here in Pennine Lancashire?” Introducing: Super Slow Way



By Jack Welsh



Zophie Begolo

There is much to get excited about along the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, says Jack Welsh; here, he investigates a huge new arts programme being created – and facing multiple challenges – along its towpaths...

In May 2015, BBC Four screened *All Aboard! The Canal Trip*, a two-hour, real-time boat journey down the Kennet and Avon Canal. Intrigued viewers were treated to a picturesque voyage, accompanied by tranquil sounds of birdsong and flowing water, taken in a single unedited shot. This experiment in ‘unhurried television’, inspired by the phenomenal success of *Scandinavian Slow TV*, tapped into the ‘slow movement’; a reaction to the fast-paced and impersonal nature of modern capitalist culture. While encouraging audiences to sit back, watch and unwind, *All Aboard!* subtly highlighted the crucial role that the waterways played in forging Britain’s industrial empire.

Ian McMillian’s poem *Super Slow Way* (written for a Canal & River Trust Project called *Locklines*) reflects how the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, as the lifeblood of the Industrial Revolution, transformed Pennine Lancashire. In its heyday, the canal was the main artery that pumped large quantities of cotton, coal, wool and other cargo across the region, fuelling economic growth and social mobility. This process of rapid industrialisation created new urban centres along the canal

with towns such as Blackburn and Burnley, crammed with bustling mills and factories, rising to prominence and cementing Lancashire’s position at the heart of the Industrial Revolution and global commerce. Today, Britain’s canal network is recognised as a conduit for leisure, more associated with dog walking than capitalist enterprise.

*Super Slow Way* is also the apt title for a new arts programme inspired by the most successful long-distance canal in the UK. Its direction will be shaped by the people of Pennine Lancashire working in collaboration with local, national and international artists and arts organisations. This proposal was awarded a £2 million grant by Arts Council England’s *Creative People and Places (CPP)* programme, a major funding stream aimed at increasing arts participation in ‘cold spots’; areas deemed as significantly below the national average. Pennine Lancashire – Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Hyndburn and Pendle – has some of the lowest culturally engaged districts in the country.

Despite these statistics, a history of community arts engagement exists within the region,

exemplified today by the work of Burnley Youth Theatre, In-Situ, Horse and Bamboo Theatre and Mid Pennine Arts. They form part of *Arts Partners in Pennine Lancashire (APPL)*, a partnership of several independent cultural organisations specialising in socially engaged practices. Led by the Canal and River Trust, *Super Slow Way's* consortium model, which includes APPL, is designed to encourage strategic partnerships aimed at strengthening the cultural infrastructure of a region badly shaken by the *National Portfolio Organisation* cuts in 2011. There are signs this has already begun to happen. APPL formed after the funding success of the *Super Slow Way* proposal, resulting in a new cohesive independent voice in the region.

Tim Eastop, arts development manager at the Canal & River Trust, is responsible for delivering *Arts and Waterways*, a collaborative arts programme situated on and inspired by Britain's waterways. Speaking to him, it's clear Eastop considers canals and rivers as natural sites for cultural activity. "To me, as an arts producer and curator, canals are really a network of cultural capillaries that have potential to carry ideas but also – literally – to carry new works of art to places where the arts traditionally haven't been able to reach." As custodian of "Britain's longest art gallery" (according to writer Richard Fairhurst), the Trust collaborates with partners, from the Landmark Trust to the British Film Institute (BFI),

to deliver such projects as Antony Gormley's *LAND* sculptures, and *The Floating Cinema*, a programme of on-board film screenings, performances and events celebrating local heritage along the Kennet and Avon Canal.

Similarly, Eastop believes *Super Slow Way* can reconnect local communities to the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. "Because of its historic role, [the canal] has had its back to the community without meaning to, and the community to the canal. We thought it is a tremendous opportunity to lead an equal consortium to address this, benefiting the arts in Pennine Lancashire and the waterways." While the consortium has unlocked Arts Council cash, Eastop hopes the money proves a catalyst for sustainable change in the region. "The idea is that the money is multiplied into something much more long-term: a match that ignites and renews arts, culture and the waterways in the region. Hopefully that will bear fruit over 10 years."

To drive the project forward, the Trust has appointed Laurie Peake: previously director of projects and programmes for Liverpool Biennial. Peake is renowned for her experience in facilitating collaborations between artists and the public, and in delivering projects defined by rich social engagement and regenerative impact. She was instrumental in commissioning major public artworks in Liverpool, including Richard Wilson's *Turning the Place Over* and Jeanne van Heeswijk's acclaimed *2 Up 2 Down* project.

I met Peake at a drab Canal & River Trust office in Burnley, overlooking the water. Over 2015, the programme has been building up momentum behind the scenes. Peake, who was born in Barrowford, a small village near Nelson, understands the area's distinctive local identities and its cultural infrastructure.

"We're very much focused on collaboratively engaged practice and co-production with the community", Peake told me. "In some CPP-funded areas there's next to no art infrastructure and they have to bring people in to deliver and produce. However, there is an existing infrastructure here. Yes, it has had a pummeling over the last few years but it's still there. I really want to use the project to inject some ambition back in it."



Stephen Turner's *Exbury Egg*, western red cedar, marine ply, recycled wood, resin and perspex, 6m x 3m (2014), courtesy the artist and The Artists Agency



Mill Hill community artist Anthony Schrag being filmed by Huckleberry Films.

Zephie Begolo

This ambition is clearly evident in *Super Slow Way's* recently announced opening programme. A solid mix of art world players and socially engaged projects will pique attention across the board. It launches with *Idle Women*, a touring, floating arts centre founded by Rachel Anderson and Cis O'Boyle. Inspired by the nickname of the women who took over operation of the Inland Waterways during World War Two, the boat will host a series of artists-in-residence, workshops and events for women. Karen Mirza, the first artist-in-residence, will hold a *Gossip*, an overnight gathering for women to meet, generate and share ideas. Stephen Turner's environmentally sustainable workspace *The Egg* will be shored in Burnley in 2016, serving as a catalyst for a local environmental project. *The Super Slow Way Symphony* is a musical homage to the Leeds and Liverpool Canal to mark its bicentennial. Composed by Ian Stephens, the piece will be debuted simultaneously at three sites in Liverpool, Blackburn and Leeds on 16 October 2016, featuring musicians from the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra to local community choirs.



## Pennine Lancashire – Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Hyndburn and Pendle – has some of the lowest culturally engaged districts in the country

Three core themes underpin Peake's artistic programming: manufacturing past and present, the natural environment, and the digital world. Each theme is inspired by, but not limited to the canal, signalling the potential for projects away from the towpath. Nonetheless, the canal represents a crucial metaphor to explore wider social and political issues relating to the region. Peake sees the historical and contemporary link with regional manufacturing being explored through new collaborations between artists and the region's current key industrial sectors, such as aerospace and nanotechnologies. The wider digital strand is based on what Peake calls "the Information Superhighway" – miles of fibre optic cables lying beneath the canal towpaths that connect the region with the rest of the world,



## The canal represents a crucial metaphor to explore wider social and political issues relating to the region

as the canal once did. Despite the shift, there are clear synergies between the tranquil and industrial canal; fibre optic cables are the contemporary manifestation of the telegraph poles that hugged the canal in the 1800s.

A walk alongside the canal, and above the fibre optic cables, took me to meet Ruth Shorrock at a *Super Slow Way Ideas Café* event in Nelson. These events are platforms to meet local communities – a necessity, as Shorrock explains. “As community coordinator, one of my most important roles is building up trust in people to think differently. It’s vital to come to places and talk to people, not just about art but social issues – what’s important to the people living in these areas?”

By visiting community gateways, such as libraries and cafes, Shorrock hopes to lay the groundwork for future conversations and projects on the ground. These ideas may germinate over a cup of tea or with an artist invited to work directly with a particular community. However, the term “community” is in itself problematic. With no agreed concrete definition, the criteria for defining local communities is subjective, which, unless approached mindfully, can exacerbate existing dualities between social inclusion and exclusion.

A major challenge facing the programme is approaching the rich cultural diversity of Pennine Lancashire. In the 1960s, a large diaspora of Indians and Pakistanis moved to Blackburn and Burnley to work in the textile mills. While these figures peaked in the 1980s, established Asian communities account for over 13% of the region’s total population. However, these tight-knit communities are often segregated, occasionally causing racial and social tension. Peake is acutely aware of these cultural sensitivities.

“There has been an unwillingness to tackle what is obviously becoming an increasingly problematic cultural divide. Unless we name it and raise the debate, how are we going to tackle it? That’s a real but exciting challenge. I’ve been on a six-month learning curve trying to understand the complex demographic make-up of the area. Multi-ethnic, and within that, multi-faith; divides within divides.”

Shorrock also recognises the right approach to engagement is essential: “A one-size-for-all approach won’t work. We plan to set up steering groups with key gatekeepers of Indian, Bengali, Hindu and Pakistani communities. We also need to consider simple things, like how to market events for each audience: how many languages are flyers required in?”

Speaking to Shorrock and Peake, it becomes apparent that the region’s low cultural engagement statistics perhaps aren’t as robust as they first appear; taxonomies that don’t account for the cultural idiosyncrasies of communities. Peake is enthused by working with these communities and bringing them to the fore. “What’s really exciting – the penny dropping in my mind – is that these communities live their culture in everyday life; the way they eat and dress, their actions and rituals. They do not make the distinction between doing something cultural and their daily life. However, their cultural activity doesn’t get airspace; it’s really crucial for this programme to address that.”

As gatekeepers to their local communities, the APPL delivery partners will play a key role in developing new cultural activity in the region. The aforementioned In-Situ is an artist-led collective working with the people and the natural and built environment of Pendle. Director Paul Hartley has been a pivotal figure in leading creative community

engagement across the region. “We sometimes find people don’t even know they’re working with an artist due to the way we’re doing it,” he says. Assimilating into the day-to-day lives of the local community has produced diverse projects at In-Situ; a chance meeting in Brierfield Working Men’s Club led to an exploration of Northern Soul culture in the region called *Recorded Soul*.

By adopting a conversational approach to engaging in everyday community life, Hartley believes that art can positively impact people’s lives. “We’re still very interested in the role that art and artists play in the challenges of community in everyday life, such as poverty, unemployment and the multi-cultural aspects of communities. I’m not saying the arts can solve these issues but they can play a part.”

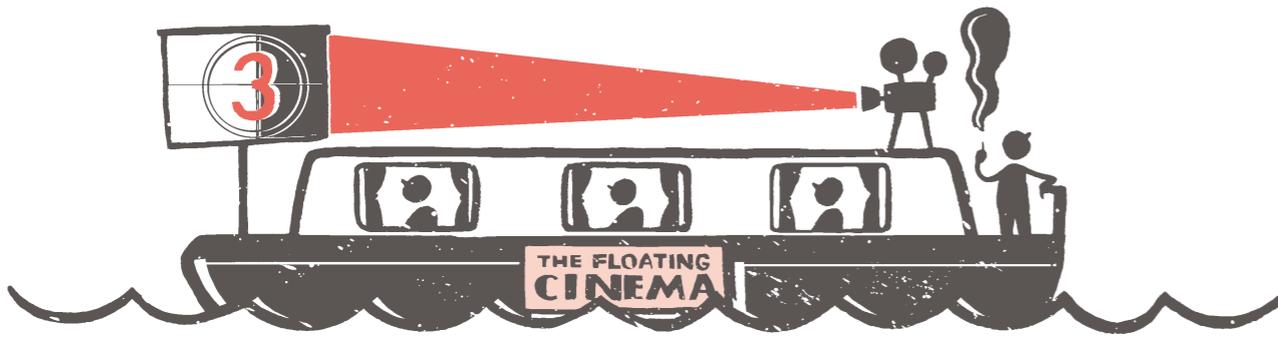
In-Situ’s *In Residence* programme was established to tackle the lack of opportunities for people in Pendle to engage with artists and challenge the local mindset that art “belongs” to cities such as Manchester and Liverpool. Hartley explains how *Super Slow Way* is supporting In-Situ’s work. “Laurie’s [Peake] quality and experience is helping to create a sense of ‘stepping up’ in the area. We’re up for it – it’s what’s driving these conversations and pushing us: we want to be as valuable as the names coming in.”

And it’s quite a name. Suzanne Lacy has been invited to develop a new commission for the *In Residence* programme entitled *Shapes of Water, Sounds of Hope*. Focusing on a simple form of incantation poetry, which will be written by local communities, the work will be inspired by *Shape Notes*, America’s most ancient form of choral music; a group activity that enabled congregational and community singing in domestic settings. Like Lacy’s renowned mass choreographed events, the traditional positioning of



William Titley

Artist Suzanne Lacy in Brierfield library



*Shape Notes* singers, seated inwards in a hollow square, promises to provide a social spectacle for the mass participation event in Brierfield in 2016. As a proponent of socially engaged practice, Hartley is thrilled to be working with Lacy. “If we do this in Pendle, it will be a major event. This has never happened here before; *Super Slow Way* and Suzanne could make it happen.”

“”

**The criticality lies in the ongoing conversations, ideas and processes; that’s the artwork**

Commissioning Lacy is a clear artistic statement of intent. A pioneer in socially engaged practice, Lacy coined the term “new genre public art” to describe artworks that, often activist in nature, directly engage with broad and diversified communities about issues pertinent to their lives. Peake considers this crucial to *Super Slow Way*’s ultimate success.

“If you’re having authentic conversations and getting to what’s important in people’s lives” Peake tells me, “[and] if you find an artist who is willing to engage genuinely in that conversation, then in my experience, those conversations are always rich and fruitful. Yes, there’s often clashes of ideology and understanding but that’s part and parcel of that richness; that’s where really great art experiences lie.”

Hartley concurs: “The criticality lies in the ongoing conversations, ideas and processes; that’s the artwork.”

Lacy champions inclusivity and multicultural representation, which can empower participants by firmly embedding them within the work. From orchestrating a – still acutely relevant – 10-year series of installations, performances and political activism with youth in Oakland, California (*The Oakland Projects* (1991–2000)), to an unscripted performance of 400 older women sharing

oral histories of feminist activism at *The Tanks* at Tate Modern (*Silver Action* (2013)), Lacy constructs works defined by dialogical communication between artist and participant throughout, culminating in an aesthetic and performative set-piece. By embracing a discursive methodology embedded within a regional context, *Super Slow Way* has the potential to critically address wider social and political issues that lie beyond the canal; where its greatest potential lies.

There is much to get excited about with *Super Slow Way*. While still in its infancy, there is a clear sense of mission and purpose here. Any concerns of instrumentalist box-ticking dissolved rapidly during conversations with key actors. A shared enthusiasm and genuine commitment to the region is matched by a wealth of experience, which suggests that key challenges, such as developing the regional cultural infrastructure and connecting with diverse – and often gated – communities, can be positively tackled. In Peake, *Super Slow Way* has the perfect director, a formidable mix of artistic vision and local sensibility. As Peake says: “Why can’t great art happen here in Pennine Lancashire?” ♦

A version of this article was originally published on [thedoublenegative.co.uk](http://thedoublenegative.co.uk).

*Super Slow Way*, Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Hyndburn and Pendle (Pennine Lancashire), UK, 2015 onwards.



**Idle Women and their floating arts centre being lifted into the canal (March 2016).**



Zophie Begolo

# Islington Mill Art Academy: Investigating What Artists Need



By Sara Jaspan

The *Islington Mill Art Academy* in Salford, Greater Manchester, has been providing a free alternative to the more traditional art school experience since 2007. Sara Jaspan speaks to its co-founder, Maurice Carlin, and participating artists to hear more about what an art education can be...

Back in the summer of 2007, Carlin was one of four Stockport College Art Foundation students who, frustrated by the prescribed environment offered by their course, lured a group of fellow class members up to the abandoned fifth floor of Islington Mill artist studios in Salford.

An informal, week-long summer school was held, during which time was spent exploring their new, ungoverned surroundings, making intervention-based works and simply talking – both among themselves and with the ‘real’ (practicing) artists they met.

Afterwards, most continued along their previous path, completing Foundation courses and going on to university. “They really enjoyed the experience of being in this other environment, but largely I don’t think many of them truly considered it as a real alternative to what they wanted to do,” recalls Carlin. A few, however, stayed on, resurrecting the school later that same year as the *Islington Mill Art Academy (IMAA)*.

The *IMAA* is one of the earlier examples among the latest wave of pedagogical experiments established over the last decade as alternatives to mainstream art education. But rather than a critique of this model, Carlin – who parted ways with formal education after completing his Foundation and is a practicing artist as well as a director at Islington Mill – describes the reason for its creation as solely “an attempt to discover the factors involved in learning how to become an artist, and to see if we could create those for ourselves”.

The school began as – and still is – an evolving investigation into what an education in art could be. Far from experimentation for the sake of it, a lot of traditional art school tropes have been drawn upon over the course of its eight-year history; from organised talks and research trips, through to workshops, residencies, study blocks, critiques, open discussion and reading groups.



Poster for a drawing class at the *Islington Mill Art Academy*



Maurice Carlin, co-founder of the Islington Mill Art Academy.

Other less formal aspects, such as regular film nights, sociable “potluck dinners” and impromptu moments of peer-to-peer support, play an equally important role. Yet, occasionally people have expressed surprise at not finding the school “more radical” in its approach. “This is a wider problem that you have within the art world, an aesthetic of radicality that’s just for the sake of it,” says Carlin. “We’ve always been trying to find what is the most useful structure that would help people.”

So what factors are conducive to learning to become an artist? Joint accountability and shared responsibility towards education emerge as being particularly important. Artist and writer Lauren Velvick, who has attended the *IMAA* since 2010, compares it to her experience of the huge class sizes at local redbrick, the University of Manchester. “Though the *IMAA* didn’t have tutors as such, I got a much stronger sense of mentorship, just because we were dealing with each other far more directly.”



While doing a degree in Dentistry may well make you a qualified dentist, the relationship between doing a degree in Fine Art and becoming an artist is far less straightforward

Similarly, asked whether the school’s non-hierarchical structure ever poses a challenge, self-employed artist Claire Hignett, who has been part of the *IMAA* for just over two years, says she found it quite the opposite. “It depends on you making a commitment to people you respect. If you say you’re going to do something you’ve made a commitment, not just to yourself but to them.”

Elaborating on the school’s self-organising ethos, Carlin adds that “if you want to be an artist, you have to be able to self-direct. I do feel that the educational experience you get as part of the *IMAA* is very close to the life that an artist has”.

He recalls realising while studying for his Foundation diploma the extent to which students were being pushed through the education system by tutors under pressure from management to satisfy various outputs. At the same time, he was meeting and speaking to artists at the Mill who had been to university to study art and came out the other end thinking, as he puts it, “what the fuck was that?”

Such experiences raise an important point. While doing a degree in Dentistry may well make you a qualified dentist, the relationship between doing a degree in Fine Art and becoming an artist is far less straightforward. “There’s a whole load



Islington Mill, Salford.





## Though this alternative approach does not invalidate universities, it does raise questions around why so many people continue to pay to do a degree in art, rather than opting for the DIY approach

of other learning, understanding and figuring out that has to be done after that,” Carlin believes, “which many were struggling to do.”

Straying from the standardised template of education is scary; it forces you to address and take responsibility for the shape and continuation of your own education. Yet this self-directing approach is also far closer to the constantly inquisitive, curious state that being an artist entails.

Reflecting this reality, *IMAA* members do not graduate as such, or leave abruptly. Instead, the process is far more organic. “Usually, the person’s other work and projects slowly eclipse their time and need for the *IMAA* structure,” Carlin explains. “Yet often they remain involved through staying on the internal mailing list (the *IMAA*’s core, organising mechanism) to remain up-to-date with what’s going on, and continue to attend the occasional event.”

In contrast to formal higher education, structured around courses with a set time span, this format tailors to the needs of the individual, while simultaneously reinforcing the idea of learning as an integrated and ongoing part of life.

Turning to the future, Carlin mentions *IMAA*’s plan to set up a permanent studio space at the Mill – a kind of village of garden sheds, affording each



Islington Mill Art Academy in action

member their own studio space as well as joint access to a larger, shared space. With so many other alternative models having come and gone in recent years, it is encouraging to hear confidence in the school’s expanding future.

Carlin highlights the autonomy and stability offered by the school’s physical setting within the Mill as a key reason for its comparative longevity. It’s a rare and much needed advantage for a group that has never received any public funding and has always remained free to attend. The Mill is also a very social space, says Carlin. “Artists, curators and other interesting people are constantly passing through, and I always make sure I direct them over to the *IMAA*.”

He adds that, ultimately, “it’s still here because it’s useful to people, and there’s a need for it. The personality of the school shifts and is characterised by the particular set of individuals that are there at any time; the kinds of things that they’re interested in and the energy they have.”

Velvick makes a similar point, linking the school’s resilience to its openness to failure. “If things were quiet for a while because people were busy with other things, that was fine – it wasn’t seen as the end,” she says. “It would just keep going and wait for new people to get involved and take it forward. It self-perpetuates in that way.”



Eight years in, it seems the *IMAA* has successfully met its initial brief – creating the conditions for a rich and ongoing education. Though this alternative approach does not invalidate universities, it does raise questions around why so many people continue to pay to do a degree in art, rather than opting for the DIY approach.

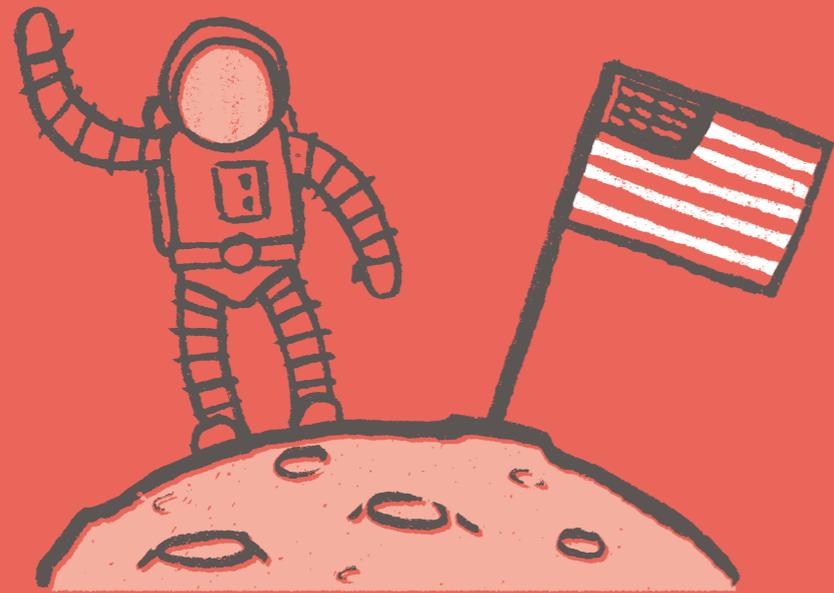
Awareness and availability of alternatives, and the growing normalisation of debt, may be part of the answer. So too is the increasing commodification of education. Paying to be taught seems to carry with it the inherent suggestion that the quality of the experience will be greater.

Perhaps the most important thing is to be clear about what you want from the process. Hignett admits she would still consider doing an art degree, but only as an “indulgence”. If what you want is to become an artist, perhaps it’s better to begin as the *Islington Mill Art Academy* did – by helping yourself. ♦

A version of this article was originally published on [a-n.co.uk/news](http://a-n.co.uk/news).

*Islington Mill Art Academy*, Islington Mill, Salford (Greater Manchester), UK, 2007 onwards.

# Contemporary Artists Make History



By Lara Eggleton

Tom Ireland, 1972; 2  
EXPLOSIONS. A CURTAIN  
FALLS (2015), two channel  
video, 01:53. Part of *Modern  
History Vol. II*, The Atkinson,  
Southport.



Artists are often the last bastion for salvaging and commemorating overlooked aspects of history, says Lara Eggleton. Here, she comes face-to-face with artworks that balance difficult histories and social critique with a strong sense of hope...

In our current information-saturated era, where most of us learn about the world through news, media and the internet, artists add a much needed moral dimension to the interpretation of events, both contemporary and historical. The idea that 'artists make great historians' was the basis for *Modern History, Volumes I, II and III*, curated by Lynda Morris and hosted by Grundy Art Gallery (Blackpool), The Atkinson (Southport) and Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre (Bury) throughout 2015.

All three exhibitions were designed as slip-streams through the dense fabric of the past, with artists and curator freely making associations between people, places and events. Many of the included works carried a strong political message, some using dark humour or irony to temper the complexity of their subject matter. Others presented unlikely comparisons or anachronisms by way of critique, or allowed lesser known facts to rise to the surface and new narratives to emerge. None of these readings claimed to be compre-

hensive or authoritative. In fact, taken together, the artists included in *Modern History* demonstrate precisely the opposite – that history is forever a work in progress.

*Modern History Vol. I*, co-organised with Sophia Crilly and Richard Parry, opened with two historic events immortalised in the pages of the Daily Express: President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963 and the first moon landing in 1969. The clippings were discovered by Morris in a Blackpool charity shop, in a box of perfectly preserved newspapers archived by a local resident. The two landmark spreads were framed and exhibited alongside the still shocking video footage of an event closer to home: Donald Campbell's fatal hydroplane crash on Coniston Water in 1967 as he attempted to break the world speed record. Hubristic tragedy meets the society of the spectacle – cue the Modern Era. Despite their geographic and cultural significance, these events are embedded in a collective global memory, signalling a new mediated horizon of history making.

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## The substantial number of early career contributions reflects her belief that age is irrelevant

Commissioned by Contemporary Visual Arts Network North-West (CVAN NW), *Modern History* is a showcase of artists originally from or based in the North-West of England, and what Grundy curator Richard Parry calls “a portrait or microcosm of certain dialogues occurring in the region”. Crucially, Morris is also interested in connecting regional dialogues with global movements, and challenging the systemic inequalities that extend beyond regional or national borders. The exhibitions avoid a simplistic notion of the ‘glocal’, however, by acknowledging their own historicising power (how the past is packaged and re-presented over time).

One particularly complex example is Robert Carter, Daniel Fogarty and Lauren Velvick’s collective project *The Exhibition Centre for the Life and Use of Books (ECLUB)*. Investigating the back catalogue of Savoy Books, a publishing company founded by David Britton and Michael Butterworth in 1976 (after a 19th-century journal of the same name), *ECLUB* flirts with conservatism through their use of taboo iconography. Their publications combined 19th-century eroticism with the “critical consciousness” of 1970s Italian design culture, part of a brief period of English science fiction that was more concerned with social realism than spaceships (exemplified in Michael Moorecock’s *New Worlds* magazine, 1946–71). Featuring Holocaust-inspired comic book villains and characters from Aubrey Beardsley’s tortured Victorian erotica, *ECLUB*’s screen printed textiles convey a historical sense of social responsibility and repression through the provocative lens of fantasy.



An accelerated period that has produced a disorienting series of “posts” (Post-war, Post-modernity, post-industrial, post-structural, post-human, etc.), the decades between the 1960s and the present day are distinct from an earlier phase of Modernity, with its origins in the late 18th century. Pavel Büchler’s *A Modern History* is a nod to this longue durée: a vitrine containing a 1970s copy of Alan Palmer’s *Penguin Dictionary of Modern History, 1789–1942*. A single sheet printed with the letter “H” bookmarks the entry on Hegel, whose dialectical view of history would directly inform Marx’s theory of historical materialism. In *Vol. III*, Rory Macbeth rewrites history with his version of Sir Winston Churchill’s *History of the English Speaking Peoples* (1956), a thin book containing only the rare sentences in which the uncompromising leader expresses uncertainty or “not knowing”. Büchler and Macbeth, both artists and academics, remind us in their reworking of official histories and testimonies that while we may be the heirs of Modernity’s darker legacies (industrialism, colonialism, consumer capitalism, global surveillance, fossil fuel mining), we also have the benefit of hindsight, and with that, the potential to change our future for the better.

The *Modern History* catalogue grew organically over the course of the three exhibitions, with pages added as conversations and works unfolded. Curatorial essays, artist statements and footnotes to artworks were collected in Wilko ring binders, where in Morris’ longstanding aspiration to “bring back a truly international and moral anti-war meaning into contemporary art” is explained in full. Her earlier research into Picasso’s political papers in Paris, and subsequent exhibition *Picasso Peace and Freedom 1945–73* at Tate Liverpool (2010), revealed to her the potential of artists to “work as individuals and as free thinkers with a moral understanding of what they see around them”. *Modern History Vol. I* included Picasso’s *Dove*, created for the *World Peace Conference* held in Sheffield in 1950, the only occasion the artist ever visited Britain. There are further links between Picasso and the North of England; *Guernica* is thought to have been exhibited in a Manchester car showroom as part of a campaign to raise awareness of the Civil War, an unverified ‘fact’ currently under investigation by artist Tim Dunbar (explained in a catalogue entry). Such are the meaningful intersections of art and politics that Morris hopes to shed light on, and bring into dialogue with contemporary works.

Drawing on networks formed over 19 years of curating *EASTinternational* at Norwich, and recent visits to graduate shows across the North-West, Morris selected artists of all ages, emerging and established, to participate in *Modern History*. The substantial number of early career contributions reflects her belief that age is irrelevant and that artists’ reputations are made primarily through association with other artists. Selecting works with particularly strong socio-political or historical content, Morris worked closely with artists to contextualise their pieces within the wider project. The collaboration gave artists invaluable experience and exposure at a crucial point in their careers. Tom Lambe (whose work is discussed further on), has expressed his excitement at being included: “Combining emerging and more established artists, showcasing Northern talent, as well as a strong socio-political /history theme... the whole idea of the exhibition series was something I was very happy to be asked to be a part of.”

Recent graduate from the University of Salford, Sarah McGurk’s *Ó dhoras go doras* (2015), which is Gaelige for “door to door”, acts as testament to the psychological effects of the Troubles on residents of Northern Ireland. After custom making each miniature door, including knockers and doorknobs, McGurk set about “vandalising” them, splashing them with paint or creating burn or explosion marks. Some doors are

*Ó dhoras go doras* (2015), Sarah McGurk.



Sarah McGurk

unmarred, representing the unseen psychological damage sustained by local inhabitants in a region with a notoriously high rate of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The work is partly autobiographical; the artist's sister was seriously injured on the 15 August 1998 when a car bomb went off in their home town of Omagh, causing the greatest number of deaths from a single incident during the Troubles. Making connections between this recent history of violence and the conflicts of our present day is central to McGurk's work, reflected in her symbolic use of colours (corresponding to prejudice and sectarianism), and use of windows and doors as literal and metaphorical barriers between public and private realms, between trauma that is seen and not seen.

Sam Mullin's *Gamer* (2015) exposes a subtler form of violence through the isolating, addictive aspects of online gaming. The animation shows a young man sitting in front of his computer, his pallid face lit by the flickering glow of the screen. He sits alone in an immaculate room that is tidied, we are told, by his mother. Mullin points out that whilst gaming establishes social

networks, online relationships have no significance beyond the virtual world, causing gamers to compulsively return to their screens for human contact. The long hours spent in seclusion make them almost entirely dependent on virtual environments for social interaction, and even this is contingent on the rules of the game. Mullin's chilling portrait (not a self portrait, though the artist has some personal experience of gaming) functions as a cautionary tale, as we have yet to discover the long-term effects of such habits on our bodies and minds, and what this could mean for future generations. The warning is not only for gamers; we can all recognise the symptoms of the effects of prolonged screen time on our physical and mental health.

Natalie Wardle's *Control Pant Symphony* (2015) is an uncomfortable yet mesmerising display of beige undergarments being snapped against the flesh of three performers, their heads outside the frame. Containing and shaping themselves with elasticated tights, wires and straps, many women continue to aspire to an ideal body type stipulated by the male gaze and perpetuated in commercial and fashion media.



Sam Mullin

*Gamer* (2015), Sam Mullin.



Natalie Wardle

*Control Pant Symphony* (2015), Natalie Wardle.

conflation between the political and the aesthetic... an oppositional 'stand in' toward a perceived higher authority that is mocked and revoked". Artists are often the last bastion for salvaging and commemorating overlooked aspects of history, and revealing the inherent biases of official surveys and testimonies. On the whole, the *Modern History* project manages to balance difficult histories and social critique with a strong sense of hope. Even further, it suggests that it is only through a critical understanding of the past that we can begin to challenge the conditions which restrict us in the present. ♦

*Modern History Vol. I*, Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool (Lancashire), UK, 25 April to 13 June 2015.

*Modern History Vol. II*, The Atkinson, Southport (Merseyside), UK, 18 August to 8 November 2015.

*Modern History Vol. III*, Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre, Bury (Greater Manchester), UK, 19 September to 21 November 2015.

Wardle's inspiration for the piece – early memories of her mother getting dressed in the morning – depressingly shows that while some things have changed (the style and colour of undergarments, for example), unrealistic standards for body types have largely stayed the same. Using humour to good effect, the artist emphasises the ugliness and artificiality of control lingerie, which wholly contradicts the idealised beauty that they promise.

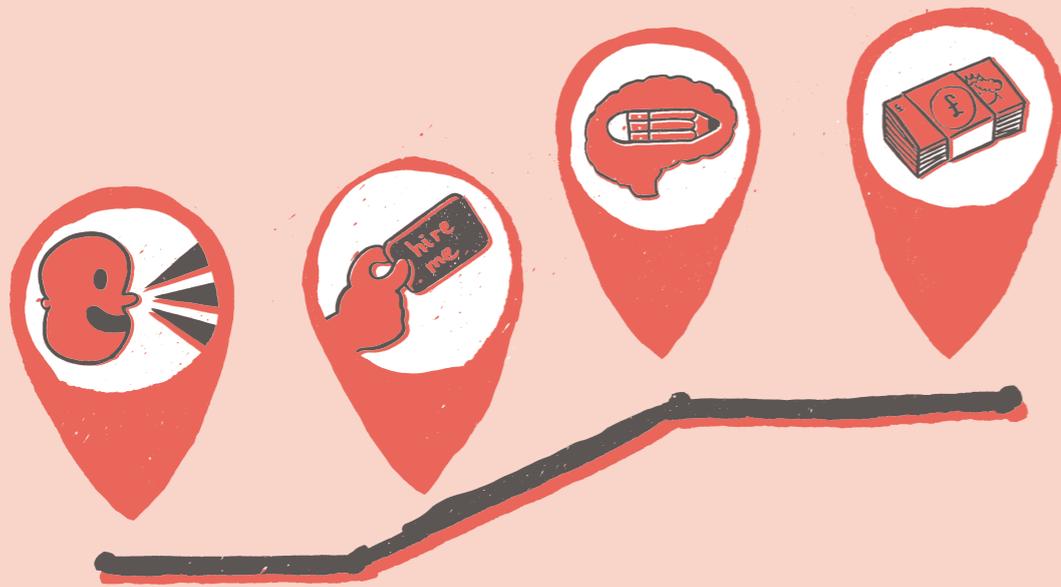
In another provocative critique, Tom Lambe picks up on themes of precarity and pessimism in *One Million, Eight Hundred and Ninety Thousand Pounds* (2015), the total debt accrued by his graduating class of Fine Art students at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2015. Forged diplomas and a list of classmates are evidence of the doomed plight of young people facing increasingly bleak job prospects whilst saddled with debt, with not a government subsidy in sight. The deterioration of the situation is documented in the catalogue, where Lambe itemises the recent legislative changes that have led to the gradual disempowerment and financial crippling of university students in the UK. It was Morris' idea that Lambe research and write an accompanying piece, which he admits 'makes for an eye-opening and depressing read'.

The future may look grim, but the spirit of these works by emerging artists is delightfully tenacious, tackling trauma, exposing inequalities and poking fun at the demented logic of late capitalism. Morris writes that "the works are a



**The spirit of these works by emerging artists is delightfully tenacious, tackling trauma, exposing inequalities and poking fun at the demented logic of late capitalism**

# Getting From A to B: Commuting the Cultural Corridor



By Lauren Velvick

The ever-rising costs of public transport – and the slow journeys between relatively close cities around the North – are a significant career barrier for contemporary artists, says Lauren Velvick. So how best do we embrace an existing Cultural Corridor and support those creative practitioners to commute for opportunities?

On one of the first chilly, autumnal Saturdays of 2015, a discussion event entitled *Creating a Cultural Corridor: The Future of the Arts in the North of England?* was held in the architecturally palindromic Pyramid and Parr Hall, Warrington. This event had been staged as part of *NORTH Contemporary*, the *Warrington Contemporary Arts Festival*; a programme of exhibitions, pavilions and performances that took place during the month of October. The aims of *NORTH* given by the appointed curator, William Lunn, were to showcase, explore and (of course) provoke the contemporary arts community within the region.

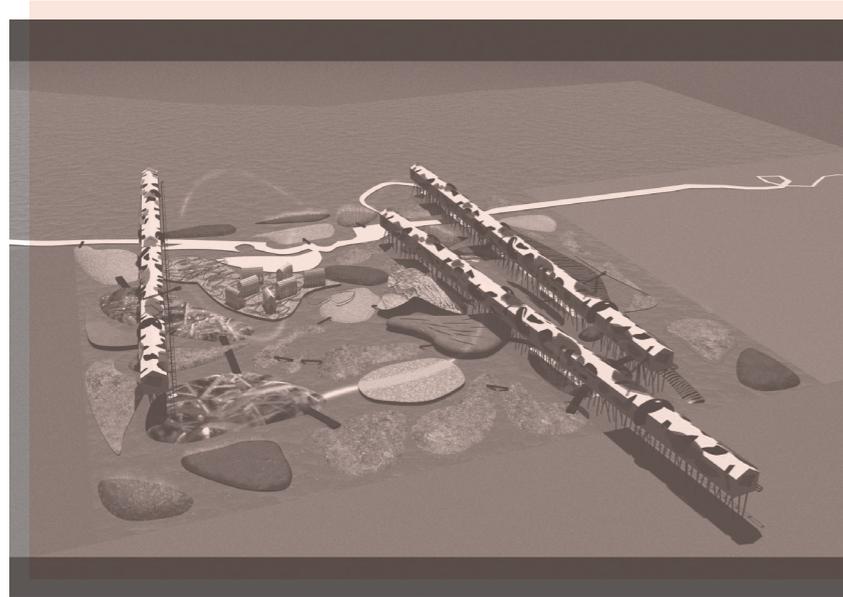
These wide, nebulous aims are echoed by the seeming confusion around the make-up and boundaries of the region itself, and such imprecision was echoed in the title and structure of the *Creating a Cultural Corridor* panel discussion. Sometimes it is one conversation amongst many similar ones that serves to crystallise a response, and this is the case here, where the organisation of this panel discussion illustrated a wider orientation towards approximation at the expense of much needed rigour.

There was only one provocation given that began to approach the Corridor specified in the event's title, and this was the first: "Do terms like regional and local weaken the arts?" As part of the panel's joint response, Stephen Snoddy of New Art Gallery, Walsall, raised the criticism that London-based curators and artists do not tend to travel outside of the capital to attend exhibition openings and events. This was used as a reason, if not justification, for Northern institutions grasping the *Northern Powerhouse* identity in order to appear attractive to those living outside of the region. In recent months, as if in order to underline the importance of having a frank and realistic discussion about the distribution of cultural consideration outside of the capital, the *Northern Powerhouse* rhetoric has rung particularly hollow as museums across Lancashire are earmarked for closure, and it is announced that the internationally important Royal Photographic Society collection held in Bradford will be moved to London.

Eleanor Clayton, curator at The Hepworth, Wakefield, on the other hand, pointed to the way that the idea of regionality is peculiarly British and can be reductive. In line with this, Adam Smythe, the recently appointed curator of the Bluecoat, Liverpool, called for a focus on supporting the confidence of the art scene in a city, rather than promoting a regional identity. These differing yet overlapping responses point to a recurring issue throughout the event, and one that often plagues talks of this kind. There was an ongoing and frequent changing of registers, shifting between discussing the experienced realities of running an institution or gallery in the North, and pointing with hope and inspirational language to the way that things ought to be. When working as an artist in the UK, access to opportunities and audiences is directly dependant on the area in which you live, and suggesting that this should not be the case is certainly optimistic, but

ignores the structural and economic factors that make cross-pollination between cities and regions difficult.

Whilst it was pointed to from a distance, or leant towards on occasion, the pressing issue that is most relevant to the concept of a Northern Cultural Corridor was left largely undiscussed during this event, and others like it; that of transport and travel between the cities and towns of the North, the UK as a whole and outwards towards Europe. The term corridor is plucked directly from the terminology of transport, referring to the Trans Pennine corridor of the M62 motorway, that cuts horizontally across the country, linking Liverpool in the West to Hull in the East, via Manchester, Leeds and all of the towns and rural areas in between. As such, the corridor already exists, and the use of the term corridor here creates a clear link between the provision for transport in the North, and that for art; but this



One architectural model for Will Alsop's *SuperCity*: a "daring prophesy for the North of England – a future where the vast M62 corridor is a singular entity, a huge coast to coast 'SuperCity', 80 miles long and 15 miles wide" (exhibition text, Urbis, Manchester (2005)).

conflation is left unexamined, assumed and secondary, rather than being offered as the focus.

A decade ago, the architect Will Alsop visualised this idea through a television series on Channel 4 and accompanying exhibition called *SuperCity* (held at Urbis, Manchester; now the National Football Museum). Alsop explored a criticism of the ways that new housing estates and suburbs are planned and constructed, leading to them feeling like non-places that are not really part of the city that they are linked to, and as such suffer from a lack of identity. His solution was to suggest that linear super-cities could be formed, using innovative utopian architecture, along existing transport routes, one of these being the Trans Pennine corridor. As such, it is clear that this is not a new idea, but it is one that has never reached any kind of meaningful fruition, and that the concept of the *Northern Powerhouse* is just the latest in a series of pipe dreams that were and are not backed up with realistic investment.

Later in the discussion held in Warrington, Laura Robertson, co-founder and editor of *The Double Negative*, appealed to the idea that travel between cities is essential for the career development of emerging artists, curators and gallerists, echoing a point made by Laurence Lane of the Salford-based gallery *The International 3*; that it is important to the development of excellent work for artists to see a wide range of other new work.

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When working as an artist in the UK, access to opportunities and audiences is directly dependent on the area in which you live

*SuperCity* installation view (2005)



These are points that it is easy to agree with, but there is rarely time set aside to raise and deal with the more general issues of cost and time that often preclude travel between the cities of the North, and which don't just affect creative practitioners.

As widespread cuts to the arts continue to force changes in the ways that artists and curators think about their practices and careers, and refurbished ex-tube stock from London is bought by the private operators of Northern train companies in order to bulk out their overcrowded services, the concept of a Northern Cultural Corridor is ripe for a realistic and focussed discussion that faces up to the logistical barriers that have so far prevented its realisation.

Recently, the idea was raised by the directors of *Islington Mill*, Salford and then carried forward to the Arts Council of an artists railcard, similar to a student or young persons railcard, that would make it significantly more affordable for practitioners based in one city to attend previews and events in another. Just pointing this out, however, amounts to much the same as saying that it's good to go to other cities. It takes



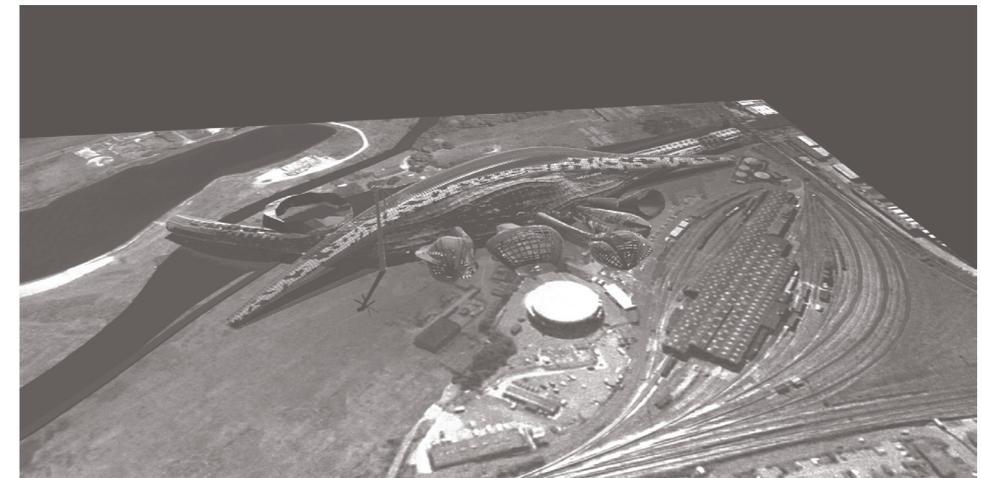
## The concept of the Northern Powerhouse is just the latest in a series of pipe dreams that were and are not backed up with realistic investment

concerted organised effort and campaigning to even raise enough awareness of this simple, specific idea for it to get anywhere near becoming a reality. During the discussion in Warrington, it was noted that the large publicly funded institutions in the North do already have links with train operators that are used for offering reduced or free travel to critics. How then, could train operators be convinced that it is just as essential for artists to traverse the region, as it is for critics to travel here from London, and whose voice has the authority to make the point?

It is already the case that train operators have a cultural remit, and are often eager to work with artists to deliver projects that can make use of their stock and station buildings. It is also conventional for exhibitions to be staged on train stations, whether they be touring, foam-board-mounted work that has been designed specifically to sit within a public concourse, or artist-led spaces taking over lesser used station buildings, like *Metal* at Edge Hill Station in Liverpool, or *Banner Repeater* on Platform 1 of Hackney Down's station in London. However, to bring the discussion of artists' travel to train operators would require an elucidation of the labour of artists, rather than proposing an end result, and as such would need to constitute an ideological shift. In this context, artists can no longer be considered solely as ephemeral 'creatives', whose role is to create cultural capital for private companies and developers, moving on when they are no longer of use or cannot afford to stay. Instead, artists would have to be considered in the same bracket as other workers, who need to commute for opportunities on far less than a living wage.



All photos in this article from *SuperCity*, Will Alsop, *Urbis* (2005).  
Photos: Will Alsop.



An example of where an idea of this ilk has achieved a level of momentum, if not outright success, is the *Paying Artists Campaign*. Instigated and promoted by a-n, The Artists Information Company, and using statistics outlining the economic contribution of the arts, this campaign argues that it is to the wider benefit of society to remunerate artists that exhibit in publicly funded spaces. Launched in May 2014, *Paying Artists* clearly and concisely outlines the steps that need to be taken in order to make its aims a reality, and is a heartening advancement beyond reiterating the fact that it would be good if artists were paid.

Similarly, whilst it is undoubtedly good to travel and good to network, the reality is that for creative practitioners without a regular income the ever-rising costs of public transport – and the slow journeys between relatively close cities around the North – are a real barrier that cannot always be overcome through sheer force of will. It would be interesting, then, to see what conclusions could be reached during a discussion on the formation of a Northern Cultural Corridor with a strict focus on the corridor itself. ♦

A version of this article was originally published on [corridor8.co.uk](http://corridor8.co.uk).

*Creating a Cultural Corridor: The Future of the Arts in the North of England*, Pyramid Arts Centre, Warrington (Cheshire), UK, 10 October 2015, 1–2:15pm.

# “It’s my dream job, but it’s voluntary”: Trials and Triumphs at The Royal Standard



By C. James Fagan

The Royal Standard at *No Soul For Sale*  
Tate Modern (2010)



One of the world’s top artist-led galleries celebrates 10 years in 2016. C. James Fagan looks at the humble origins, many challenges and far-reaching achievements of The Royal Standard and asks: What next?

Want to feel old? Well, The Royal Standard Gallery & Studios turns 10 this year. Saying that, is 10 actually that old? In dog years, yes; yet in terms of the art world that’s still very young. You could consider that The Royal Standard is entering a kind of adolescence; a phase where you grab all that experience as one of the best international independent art groups (as voted by *No Soul For Sale* at Tate Modern in 2010), and try to figure out what it all means and what you are going to do with it.

Shall we begin with an origin story? According to The Royal Standard’s old guard, it all began in a pub in Toxteth, Liverpool. On learning upon this first venue, it’s not difficult to imagine that the idea of The Royal Standard was born from one of those four-pint-fuelled discussions, amongst Liverpool John Moores art graduates, about the lack of this and that. About how if you had an arts space, if you were in charge, it would be different. You know, those chats which dissipate outside the realm of the public house and in the next day’s hangover.

However, in this case, the artists that congregated around that pub table made sure their impassioned discussions solidified into something more concrete: a contemporary, artist-led gallery space and studio complex in Toxteth that was (crucially) cheap to rent, and would be a magnet for the ambitious, emerging and established artists of the city and from further afield. It succeeded; morphing into a non-profit company, annually funded by Arts Council England, that provided a workshop, experimental project space and residency programme outside a wider set of regular gallery and studio events. As a result, they had to move to a bigger venue in 2008, choosing a wind-swept industrial estate on the city centre and Everton boundary; a location which is both part of the city and yet just on the edge. This is how I discovered The Royal Standard and is the form I’m familiar with, having relocated to the North-West in 2009.

On first visiting The Royal Standard – and Liverpool – in that post-*European Capital of Culture* flush, the art space seemed to reflect a



The Royal Standard's original location in a disused pub in Toxteth

certain confidence and energy. Confirming the idea I had that Liverpool was a city where people did stuff. That stuff, or what I saw on my first visit, was a piece of live art in which a man squatted wearing high heels in the middle of the gallery space, and we as an audience were allowed to throw lumps of coal at him. Or that's how I remember it. I can't quite recall the details, and haven't been able to track down the artist since; however, the sense of a place where spontaneity happens has always remained.

More fundamentally then, we remember that The Royal Standard has been an important platform for innovative work. As well as exhibiting new artworks by more established British artists such as Susan Philipsz, Marcus Coates and Jamie Shovlin, the space is also a collective of 35 working artists. The studio was always a key element of The Royal Standard's ethos; as founding member Paul Luckraft and current exhibitions curator at the Zabłudowicz Collection, London, recalls.

"Having a studio group at its core is something we built from at the very start", Luckraft tells me. "That idea of committed artists, working in a variety of modes, but grouped together to offer a sense of critical mass and shared ambition in a city that at the time was thin on high quality platforms."

From that planted critical mass and shared ambition, successful artists bloomed; such as *Northern Art Prize* nominees Leo Fitzmaurice, Rosalind Nashashibi and Emily Speed; former Royal Standard directors Dave Evans, Frances Disley and Kevin Hunt who set up their own artist-led space MODEL during Biennial 2014; and rising star Joe Fletcher Orr, who currently runs the tiny but critically-acclaimed Cactus Gallery from within The Royal Standard Studio. This alumni also includes co-founder and editor of *The Double Negative* arts criticism magazine, Laura Robertson, and associate director at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, Lucy MacDonald.

In this small example you can begin to see the relevance of The Royal Standard within the ecology of the UK's Northern art scene. Though at times over its 10-year history, it may have appeared to be off the beaten track, a place where "you got to be in the know, you know" (as *Regular Show's* protagonist Mordecai would have it). This maybe simple misrepresentation, created by its location always on the edges; equally, this may reflect its independent spirit and its ability to do things differently than Liverpool's larger, publicly funded institutions, such as FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology) and the Bluecoat. Should it matter if people have perceived it as an insular institution? Well yes; at the very least it denies the work and effort put into it by directors and artists alike.



## This is the condition The Royal Standard has placed itself in: dedicated to independence in a city of large institutions

And what of its position as an arts institution? A 10-year anniversary would be an apt time to look not only at the success of The Royal Standard but to where it goes over the next 10 years. Should it carry on ploughing the same furrow, applying for *Grants for the Arts* and being operated by a rolling two-year directorship of volunteers? Or should it follow the path of independent arts organisation Project Space Leeds, which transformed in infrastructure, size and reach into The Tetley arts centre. Perhaps there is another way than the expected path of a small artist-led organisation moving onto something bigger, more permanent, and more costly; and perhaps less suited to meeting individual artists' needs.

The best people to speak to about The Royal Standard's future are current directors Ellie Barrett, Emma Curd and Ashleigh Owen. Owen describes the difference between the perception of the directorship and the actual responsibilities of the role.

"When people find out your job title", he laughs, "they immediately think of Maria Balshaw (director of The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester) or Sally Tallant (director of Liverpool Biennial). It's not like that; yesterday I was cleaning out the toilets!"

This is a good indication of the realities of working within the art world, especially at this level; a key mid-tier space providing artistic development and cutting-edge programming on a budget. It also displays the kind of dedication this type of role demands: as simultaneous director, marketing officer, building manager, curator, events organiser, accountant, fundraiser, and so on. A role that isn't set in stone and requires a person to



Harry Meadley at Cactus Gallery, which is based at The Royal Standard

attempt many tasks and responsibilities – roles never considered whilst still studying at university.

“The directorship is so openly defined and difficult to pin down”, fellow director Barrett continues, “because we want it to remain as an overwhelming and completely encompassing experience of the arts sector.”

Still, we might wonder why anyone would want to take on such demanding and unpaid work; yet the enthusiasm Barrett, Curd and Owen share for not only their role but for the arts as a whole is infectious. As Curd puts it: “It’s my dream job, but it’s voluntary”.

These three find themselves halfway through their two-year stint; for the majority of The Royal Standard’s history, it has been run by directors who stay for a minimum term of 24 months; the leaders of what they describe as a “strange organism”. Unlike other arts organisations, The Royal Standard operates as a kind of training ground, allowing each new set of directors the room to shift and mould the direction of the brand. This way of working allows the directors, as Barrett says, to “have the ability to take risks and experiment with the potential of curating.”

Barrett cites her event *CLAM JAM*, which served as exhibition, performance and discussion about the role of women in art, as an example of this potential of curating, as well as a personal highlight.

This is the condition The Royal Standard has placed itself in: dedicated to independence in a city of large institutions. This makes it become an island of possibility, a Shangri-La for new artists and recent graduates to aim for. Not that The Royal Standard sees itself as a final destination. Recent developments have seen the creation of what might be considered sub-galleries, like the aforementioned Cactus, but also White Wizard, 6 Gins and Muesli (the latter two LJMU graduate projects). Spaces within spaces, where artists and curators seek to exhibit work separately from The Royal Standard. Here we have an ambition to encourage artists to work differently within a larger art organisation, rather than simply use that studio space just to make work; it should be used to create new ways of showing, debating or selling art.



CLAM JAM (2015)

Owen speaks about how The Royal Standard shouldn’t act as a monopoly; rather it should encourage and be challenged by a number of different curatorial projects, hoping that this will create a more challenging and vibrant art scene. Wanting to work differently for the benefit of that scene as a whole is evident when I talk to the directors. When I ask (a rather cliché question) if they had a pot of gold, which artists would they exhibit, they agree that rather than spending heaps of money on “superstar” artists, they would rather see it spent on creating a sustainable space to support new artists to continue to make and show work. To give artists and curators the facilities to do so, whether that’s through exhibitions, residencies or other relevant methods. Also, good heating would be welcome.

But what of the future? The organisation has just officially become an arts charity after much hard work, meaning major changes to the types of funding it can receive. The next 12 months will see The Royal Standard in residence in Temple du Goût, Nantes, France; and welcome Ukrainian resident artists to Liverpool, making work that will form part of the city’s Biennial. Plus, a 10-year special anniversary exhibition is in the making; a kind of greatest hits compilation.

Most thrillingly, another move is planned. Although at the point of writing this article this is ‘whispers on the wind’, what could a new building mean? On one level, if it was to a larger space, that could mean more artists’ studios and the scope to hold larger exhibitions. If it was further into the city centre, then that could see an increase in the awareness of The Royal Standard and the work it does; more visitors and perhaps more financial stability. Curd is positive about any potential future move. “I have a feeling that in moving, it would make The Royal Standard more current, more exciting, more accessible.”

It’s been strange, attempting to create an overview of an organisation like The Royal Standard. For its very nature is to change: every time a new set of directors takes over, they inherit the successes and failures of the former directors; its style and content is under constant revision, whilst holding onto a core vision of and dedication to high quality artistic development.



**As always, the only constant is change. The Royal Standard will change – in location, in ideas, in the roles of directors, in the artists it will attract and retain**

It doesn’t mean that The Royal Standard has always been, or will always be, successful in its approach. However, it’s the risk taking that seems most pertinent here; which within this current climate of cuts and devaluing of the arts would seem to be more necessary, more vital than ever. Of course, if you think The Royal Standard isn’t doing the ‘right thing’... well, you could follow their example and start something. Which, by all accounts, they would love to see happen.

Perhaps, then, The Royal Standard’s legacy is to stimulate others to create something, whether that be through inspiration or annoyance. Though it feels strange talking about legacies, as The Royal Standard is still ongoing. Maybe we should think about the organisation more as a continuum; something that is passed on for others to do with as they please.

As always, the only constant is change. The Royal Standard will change – in location, in ideas, in the roles of directors, in the artists it will attract and retain. After all, this is an organisation that once belonged in a Toxteth pub. It is this mutability which defines it: always the same, always different. Or as Curd puts it: “The Royal Standard will always be The Royal Standard.” ♦

The Royal Standard Gallery & Studios, Liverpool (Merseyside), UK, 2006 onwards.

# Why #writecritical?



By Sue Flowers

Sue Flowers reflects on the critical writing award that formed the foundations for the book you now hold in your hands; an intensive mentoring project that sought to increase the quality and quantity of arts writing and critical discussion in the North-West of England...

Much has been written about the visual arts, perhaps as a way of defining it; attempting to analyse, explain and enable access to a world that often remains beyond the grasp of many. It could be argued that those who write about the arts become gatekeepers to it, for they select and communicate artworks and artists in a way that can reach millions.

It might also be said that in an attempt to exemplify great art, a writer could unwittingly profile a chosen few, whilst unintentionally dismissing many others. One could therefore argue that in doing this, writers and art critics have taken control over the socio-political status of art, and that it is their critical analysis and aesthetic dialogue that has gone on to establish what we know of as the art world today.

I know many artists currently working in the North-West who don't actually consider themselves to be a part of this world. The Art World – as it would appear to them – is something else, something large and elusive which they have no control or influence over; it goes on elsewhere and is very difficult to access, to exist within or feel a part of. Writing as an artist myself, I can feel their frustration, but can't buy into the attitude; because as artists we form society's understanding of art, and through our creative processes we can help to shape and define the – now more connected than ever – world we live in.

However, it could be that people who like writing about art, who are also based in the North-West, lack access to paid writing opportunities; their publishing platforms and research resources are limited; and their ability to find out what is going on is led by what we as artists and arts organisations put out there.

Thankfully, over the last couple of years, members of Visual Arts in Liverpool (VAiL) – a group of cultural organisations based in the city whose aim is to support the arts – have been striving to redress this imbalance by developing an innovative project aimed at increasing the quality and quantity of critical writing in the North-West. The project, part of *Art:ADDS (Art: Audience, Development, Discourse & Skills)*, was funded by Contemporary Visual Arts Network

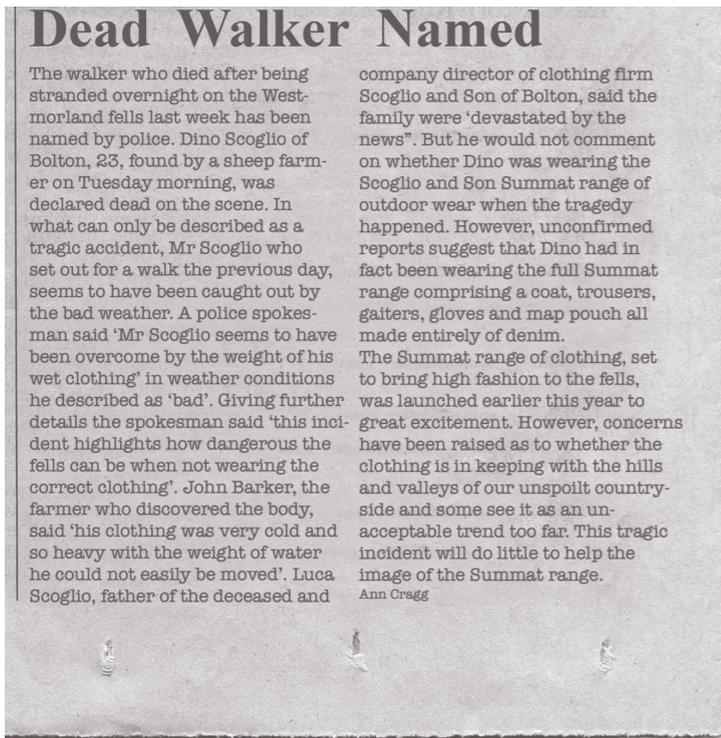
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**What evolved was an incredibly ambitious project that would involve one-to-one support for art writers at all stages of their careers**

North-West (CVAN NW) with financial support from Arts Council England. A critical writing strand (which can be found online via the #writecritical hashtag) was delivered via a series of workshops, mentoring sessions, writing fees and travel bursaries.

It almost seamlessly drew together key critical writers, editors and independent publishers from across the North-West and the UK; appearing as if the project had bubbled up under the surface of a real cultural need. People such as Laura Robertson, co-founder and editor of The Double Negative arts criticism journal; Sinead Nunes, the then-editor of listings site Art in Liverpool; and Susie Stubbs, former director of culture and travel guide Creative Tourist. All played a key role in establishing a working group which widened out to include two Manchester-based freelance writers, broadcaster Bob Dickinson (Art Monthly, BBC) and former Corridor8 editor and co-founder of Bureau Gallery, Sophia Crilly; working with Elaine Speight, curator of In Certain Places, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, and Manchester Metropolitan University lecturer Rosemary Shirley.

*Art:ADDS* came at a key point in time: Speight and Shirley had already been trying to develop a joint critical writing programme across their two universities, and The Double Negative had been encouraging more critical arts dialogue through their online platform since 2011. What evolved was an incredibly ambitious project that would involve one-to-one support for art writers at all stages of their careers; keen to advance their practice and experience as critics.



“”

## The boundaries between word and image are not so black and white as it would seem

The number of applications to the critical writing strand of the *Art:ADDS* project perhaps underpinned the need that the working group had identified – 140 applications for 25 bursary places. I was selected; yet unlike other creative projects I had been a part of in the past, this one had a feel of winning a golden ticket that would lead to real professional development; I couldn't wait to start.

We were offered six, full-day professional development workshops, each one led by experts from the aforementioned publications and wider field; a period of mentoring over six months; publishing opportunities on regional and national arts platforms; plus money to travel and write. I recall that each one seemed to reveal a previously unknown truth; a-n editor Chris Sharratt's workshop at the Bluecoat, Liverpool, happily immersed us in his profound knowledge of journalistic practice; dropping us into a mock press conference five minutes in, with him as the star, challenging us to discover what made him tick.

My light-bulb moment was Sharratt's expressed love of the written word. He spoke as a writer who also loves art; he wanted us to consider the story, its narrative style, form and function. The artwork was almost secondary to

the importance of the communication; he presented critical writing as an art form in its own right, whereas previously I'd thought that all art writers understood the visual world in exactly the same way an artist did.

My critical writing bursary articles, consequently, have mostly explored text within art and vice versa. One drew attention to Preston-based text and installation artist Rebecca Chesney, who compellingly refutes her interest in the use of written language. Her reason? "My language is visual – that's why I can't pin it down", Chesney explained. "For me, writing is a translation of the language so it'll never quite hit it."

When you press Chesney for more information, she admits she loves developing narratives in her work. "I like to use text to play with people's perceptions", she says, "treating labels as fact – when in fact the words can authenticate the lie". Chesney's installation *Death by Denim* (2015) beautifully demonstrates how she uses text to define a narrative that she wants the viewers of her work to believe. Whilst she is vehement she only works visually, the archive she puts on display in this work, painstakingly crafted, clearly uses words to enable the viewer to fall into her imagined reality. The boundaries between word and image are not so black and white as it would seem.



Robertson believes that writing is a fundamental necessity for all artists, but they don't need to be critical writers themselves; the importance lies in how to contextualise their work across a range of platforms available. Artists probably don't realise how much they do write – from artist's statements, social media, website biographies and exhibition catalogues – so it's vitally important that we know what we're doing across these two languages. She is passionate about the *Art:ADDS* critical writing strand and it has even inspired me to start my own blog.

Of artists writing, Robertson elaborates: "It's a very useful tool within the context of their own practice. I want to contribute to a healthy arts scene in the North-West, where people are making great art, and it's being written about, seen and enjoyed. If people don't write about art, how can others know it's going on?"

So maybe critical arts writing can be as fundamental as that? It's not about some esoteric culturally elite writers living in central London – it's about making sure others know what's going on and analysing whether it's ambitious enough or not. And I love that the inspiration for this project has come from the Liverpool arts scene; a place with such a strong social and political background in activating change.

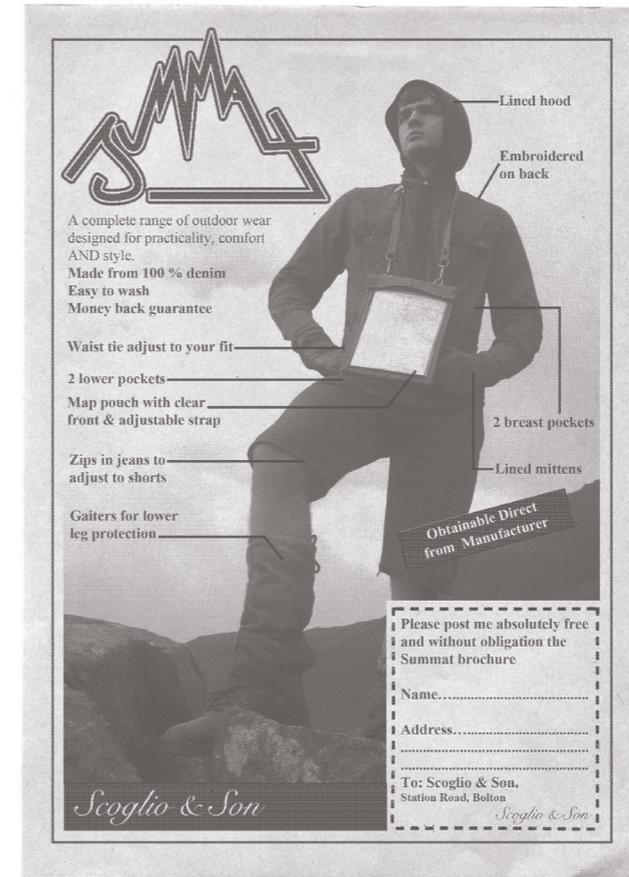
From my own perspective, I am fully convinced this project has made a real difference. For a start, a group of professionals have opened up a world that many of the bursary holders originally found perplexing, and we're now all in touch with each other, regularly receiving emails inviting us to review exhibitions. Nervousness around pitching to editors is a thing of the past, and the participants have gone on to write for international magazines *ArtReview* and *Art Monthly*.

“”

## It's about making sure others know what's going on and analysing whether it's ambitious enough or not

I'm so excited for the *Art:ADDS* graduates; but having experienced how competitive the freelance writing world is, and how long it takes to write even a short article (having bounced it back and forth from your editor), I wonder what the future holds for critical writing and these fledgling writers.

I ask Emma Fry, the *Art:ADDS* project manager, what her thoughts are on this. "I don't think people really knew, or even understood, how fragile the world of critical writing is. I get a sense that it's something that people recognise as important now, particularly in the North-West: that you need good communication, advocacy and critical writing to create better conditions for artists."



All images in this article courtesy Rebecca Chesney, *Death by Denim* (2015).

Fry is proud – and rightly so – of this project, and I'm guessing that she feels she has scored a well-earned goal in the CVAN net; whose mission, like VAI, Arts Council England and the other people invested in *Art:ADDS*, is to nurture contemporary artists and organisations, in order to produce critically engaged work that is valued.

She, and the many others who have led and contributed to the programme have done a great job in the North-West, and for now, it looks like critical writing is here to stay. The #writecritical writers are much-needed new gatekeepers, and there is certainly plenty of work that needs shouting about. ♦

A version of this article was originally published on [artinliverpool.com](http://artinliverpool.com).

Contemporary Visual Arts Network North-West (CVAN NW) *Critical Writing Bursary & Workshop Programme*, North-West of England, UK, 2014–16. All articles from this bursary can be found at [cvanetwork.squarespace.com/cvan-nw-critical-writing](http://cvanetwork.squarespace.com/cvan-nw-critical-writing), and via Twitter: #writecritical.

# About the Writers



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**Laura Harris** is a cultural commentator and researcher specialising in socially engaged practice. Since receiving the CVAN NW bursary, she has been awarded a PhD Studentship at the University of Liverpool, in which she will undertake ethnographic research at the *Bluecoat* into the role of the contemporary arts centre.  
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**On Being Curious: New Critical Writing on Contemporary Art From the North-West of England**

With a foreword by Richard Smith  
Edited and with an introduction by Laura Robertson  
Published by The Double Negative  
on behalf of Contemporary Visual Arts  
Network North-West (CVAN NW)

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**Laura Robertson**, an arts writer and editor  
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Art Monthly, ArtReview, The Guardian, a-n and  
Creative Tourist. She co-founded The Double  
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in 2011 with writer and editor Mike Pinnington,  
and is a trustee and former director of The  
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Amelia Crouch  
Lara Eggleton  
C. James Fagan  
Sue Flowers  
Laura Harris  
Katrina Houghton  
Sara Jaspan  
Liz Mitchell  
Richard Smith  
Lauren Velvick  
Jack Welsh

“This book provides 10 smacks in the face to the idea that art criticism is dead. Art needs to be interrogated, artists’ ideas stretched and pummelled, loved and lauded: the writers contained within these pages do all this and more, with verve and humour, hitting points and making targets with scary panache.”

**Oliver Basciano, editor (international), ArtReview**

“This is a book that encourages and celebrates new writing, contemporary art and curiosity, and as such, I applaud it.”

**Jennifer Higgle, writer, co-editor of frieze and editor of frieze masters magazine**

“*On Being Curious* is a good title for this book. But while curiosity on the part of a writer is important, the curiosity of the reader is a writer’s best friend – good writing provokes that curiosity, it makes you want to read on, to know more. The confident, clearly expressed articles in this collection provide an insight into contemporary art in the North-West, while also charting the development of new writing talent as it finds its voice. I am curious to see what comes next.”

**Chris Sharratt, writer and editor**

